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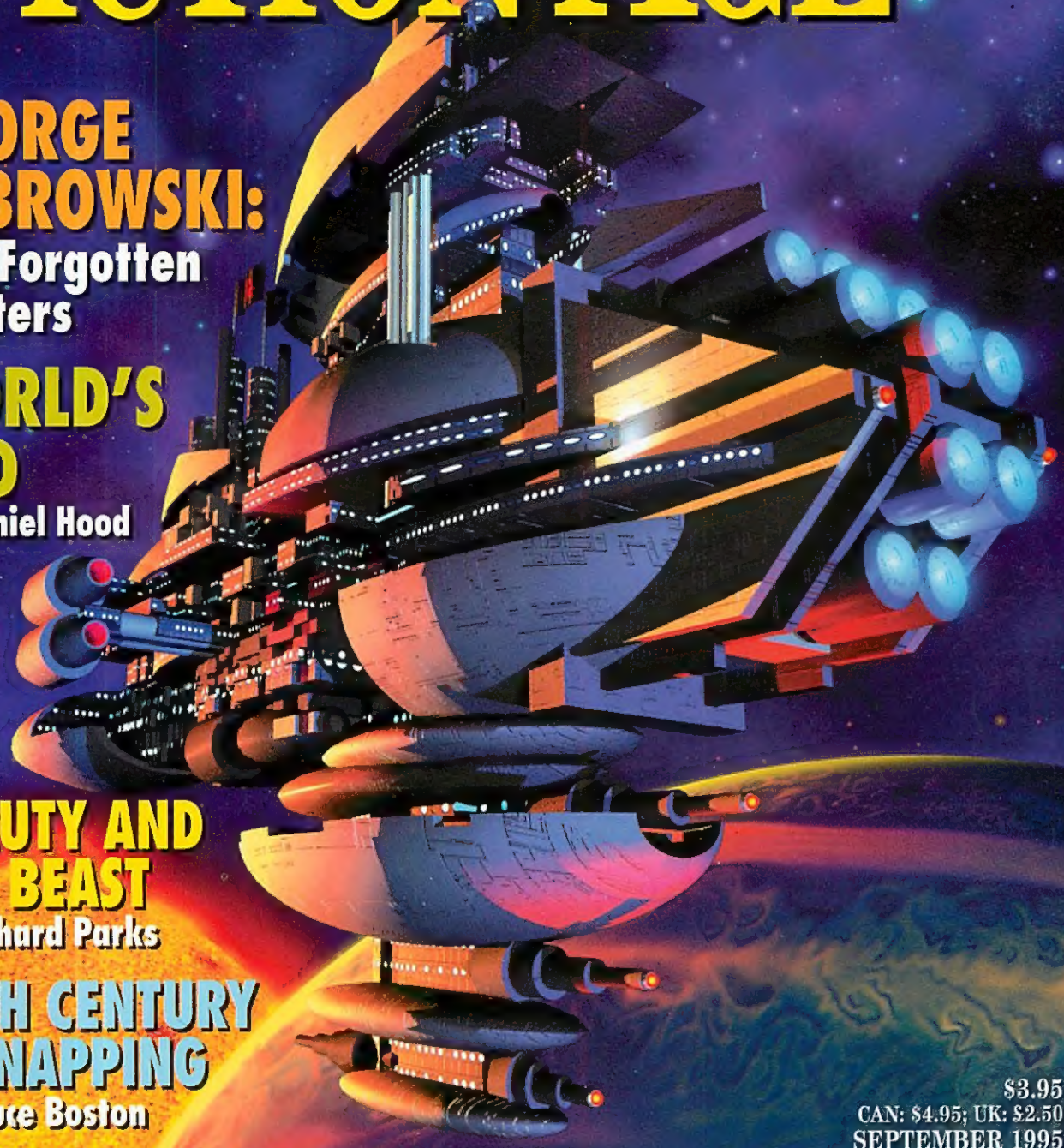

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COVER: An orbiting space station keeps watch over the alien world below. Art by George Krauter. ABOVE: An Earth woman defends her world against atomic invasion. See Gallery on page 82 for more work by featured artist Richard Hescox.

DEPARTMENTS

6 LETTERS
Readers write on SF art and future horror.

8 EDITORIAL
Winning isn't everything, but even in SF, it sure feels good.

10 BOOKS *BY D. DOUGLAS FRATZ*
Greg Bear creates *New Legends* with an original Hard SF treasure trove.

18 MOVIES *BY DAN PEREZ*
Dan O'Bannon brings Philip K. Dick's nightmare visions to life in *Screamers.*

24 SCIENCE *BY ARLAN ANDREWS AND YOJI KONDO*
The grass is always greener on the other side of the universe.

30 ESSAY *BY GEORGE ZEBROWSKI*
Never forget the SF writers who helped build yesterday's tomorrows.

82 GALLERY *BY EDWARD BRYANT*
Sense of wonder and the space art of Richard Hescox.

92 COMICS *BY GEOFFREY MANN*
Battlestar Galactica, Miller's latest, and classic EC.

94 GAMES *BY DANIEL L. MARCUS*
Don your battle armor and defend starship *Marathon* against alien invaders.

102 CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

38 SWEET BELLS JANGLED
By Martha Soukup
Something terrible was trapped in Laurie's brain. Something she could not get out.

45 SPONDULIX
By Paul Di Filippo
Money may be the root of all evil, but in the not too distant future, it will spark miracles.

60 SPOILS OF WAR
By William John Watkins
When aliens fall from the sky, humans often rise up.

62 STRIKER OUT
By Bruce Boston
Though life will be very different in the ninety-fifth century, some things will never change.

68 BIOUNIVERSITY
By Daniel Hood
Will tomorrow's plague destroy the world or save it? Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

74 THE OGRE'S WIFE
By Richard Parks
Marybeth's monstrous husband was a vengeful trickster, and her only hope for survival was to go him one trick better.

88 A SORT OF WALKING MIRACLE
By Stephen Dedman
Death is inevitable. But for a time traveler, inevitable can stretch into a long, long time.

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LETTERS

Dear Sir:

In your May issue, there was a letter by Bryan O'Driscoll about the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence. It was well-written, but lacking in reason. He wrote that he thought SETI was "not a good idea." His reason was that an ETI would find us before we find it, because of SETI. If I were him I would worry less about the regular radio patterns that SETI sends out and more about domestic transmissions. Long before SETI, the good old radio and television programs from way back when, about world-wide war campaigns, along with any number of programs that portray our species murdering ETIs in abundance because of ignorance, fear and prejudice (all too common for even an outsider to ignore, I'm sure) will reach ETIs light years away.

I don't know about my pal Bryan, but I'd be significantly more concerned about ETIs seeing images of Captain Kirk committing genocide on a variety of exotic life forms or necking with an ET in go-go boots and fish net stockings. If nothing else, SETI might contradict part of the good captain's representation of us, and help ETIs infer that there is some level of civilization here (well, kind of).

Sincerely,
John Medinger

Dear Mr. Edelman:

Your editorial in the May 1995 issue left me a bit annoyed. There is something intrinsically wrong with the picture of *concerned* fans surfing the information superhighway, searching, vulturelike, for the death-knell to announce the passing of another science fiction notable. Using the information superhighway as your "global encyclopedia" is admirable. I'm a staunch supporter of technology, but there are several ethical questions that need to be addressed, especially when it comes to blasting people's death-throes throughout cyberspace.

Your reference to "gossip-filled fanzines" is ironic, considering all the crap the nets spew out as truth. The fanzines I read are gems of honesty and discretion *(Apparatchik, Derogatory Reference, File 700, HABAKKUK, Lan's Lantern, Mimosa, Spent Brass, STET and Sticky Quarters).*

Well, most of the time.

Gregory Benford's essay ("There is nothing wrong with playing in each other's SF universe.") reinforces my dislike of such activities. Shared universes, at the very least, show a lack of imagination. Shared universes may not be plagiarism but, in my opinion, it is intellectual theft—depending on the source, of course. (Garbage in, garbage out.) C'est la vie. Keep up the good work.

Michael W. Waite

Dear Mr. Edelman:

During the past fifty plus years, I have read thousands of SF novels, short stories, novellas, etc. For the most part, I have thoroughly enjoyed them all, even the "bad" ones.

Perhaps not *the* best, but right up there among them, in my opinion, is Mark Tiedemann's "After." This is one of the most touching, meaningful, frightening short stories I have read in quite a while. I hope that Mark will use this short story as an outline and develop it into a full-length novel. There are galaxies of potential contained within this tale. He can be assured of at least one sale.

As always, I look forward to each new issue of *Science Fiction Age* and enjoy re-reading some of the past issues. Thank you for a *great* magazine.

Sincerely,
P. B. (Pete) Blackwell

Dear Sirs:

Thank you so much for printing Esther Friesner's appreciation of David Mattingly. Though the styles of my favorite artists are eclectic, Mr. Mattingly is one of my top three favorites. Not only is he a practical visionary in his conceptions, he is a true craftsman in his work. His spaceships, even the ornate dreadnoughts on your July cover, look like they were designed to be real vehicles, not just sleek or bizarre or eye-catching. When he does close-ups of faces, as with *Distant Friends and Others* by Timothy Zahn, he can capture just the right emotional attitude.

I can hardly visit the SF shelves in a store for more than two months without seeing a new book cover by him. In spite of his gratifyingly increased exposure, I feel he is one of the best, but least recognized SF and Fantasy artists today. I sincerely hope he wins a Hugo someday.

Sincerely,
Dana H. Boden

Dear Scott:

It was good seeing my story "The Human Cycle" in the May *SF Age.* The illustration was one of the most striking I've ever had. The only problem was that my dedication to my late girlfriend Claire Brown was omitted. I couldn't have written the story without her anthropology textbooks.

Sincerely,
David Cleary

Readers—please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, *P. O. Box 369, Damascus, MD 20872.*

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

VOLUME 3 NUMBER 6

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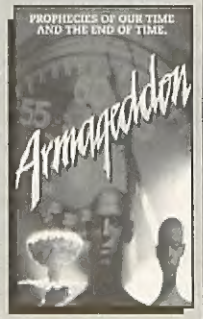

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By Scott Edelman

Winning isn't everything, but even in SF, it sure feels good.

Martha Soukup shares her Nebula Award (briefly) with editor Scott Edelman.

I HOPE YOU WON'T TUNE ME OUT THIS ISSUE, THE WAY I know you do when your talkative neighbor pulls out a wallet or purse full of pictures of grimacing grandchildren. You smile and nod politely because you don't want to offend, but all the while you're trying to decide how quickly you'll be able to get away without hurting the proud grandparent's feelings. Well, editors are different. (I hope.) And the matter of pride which I pray will *not* bore you and have you checking your watch through the remainder of this page is simply this—

Martha Soukup, author, actress, bon vivant on the SF convention circuit, Martha Soukup, whose book and game reviews you have read in these pages, and who has often been a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award, Martha Soukup, whose phosphor presence delights those who share cyberspace with her on-line on GEnie, Martha Soukup...

Martha Soukup has won the Nebula Award for Best Short Story from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America for "A Defense of the Social Contracts," which was originally published here in *Science Fiction Age*. It was Martha's first win, which alone is enough to set me to beaming, for I have long felt her deserving of walking away with any one of those statues, but also, it is *our* first award.

Science Fiction Age is just finishing off its third year of publication. We are still considered one of the new kids on the SF block. But time is running out on us being able to continue playing the role of young pup in the SF doghouse. So it is thrilling that just at the moment when we are ending the honeymoon of our publication and moving on to becoming (I hope) an SF tradition, we were able to see an author win a Nebula to mark that transition. It was the best rite of passage possible.

I checked into Manhattan's Grand Hyatt hotel the weekend of April 21st in the highest of spirits. Whatever was to happen, *Science Fiction Age* would come off looking good. The final Nebula ballot in the Best Short Story Category included not only Martha's aforementioned story but also Barry N. Malzberg's "Understanding Entropy," which meant that stories originally published in these pages made up one-third of the stories represented, itself alone a mighty accomplishment for so young a magazine.

I found it difficult to sleep that night even though I had been up past three in the morning, the bed was soft, and the walls were well-sound-proofed from the 42nd Street traffic. I know I was supposed to be calm and cool about this, but there was no way I could be. After all, you can only win your first award once. Saturday night, April 22nd, Nebula night, the most important night of the year for SF professionals, could not come soon enough for me.

That night found me at a banquet table in the grand ballroom with Martha, Barry, regular *SF Age* contributors Paul Di Filippo and Adam-Troy Castro, *Realms of Fantasy* editor Shawna McCarthy, and other well-wishers. The food was excellent and the conversation captivating, but no one could forget what had brought us here that night. At least *I* couldn't. Luckily, when it came time to hand out the evening's awards, the short story category was the first to be announced. As elder statesman Emil Petaja opened the envelope, Martha, Barry and I clasped hands. I closed my eyes and held my breath.

And then Martha's name was announced, and the cheering began. Martha could barely make it to the dias amidst the sea of hugs. Her speech was full of enthusiasm and genuine surprise, and when she came back to our table, we all marveled at the beauty of the trophy, a handmade work of art.

I could not stop smiling that night. (I am smiling still.) The rest of the evening was spent in blissful celebration, as people came up to Martha and me and wished us well.

Later, talking to a friend of mine, I asked, "Do you have any idea what it feels like to be in a room with hundreds of people, all of them wanting to congratulate you?"

He replied, deadpan: "No."

Which again made me realize just how lucky I am.

Today, though, *you* are the lucky ones. For if you turn to page 38, you will find the latest story by Martha Soukup, now a Nebula Award winner.

As for Barry Malzberg, do not feel too sad for him. For though he did not win the Nebula that night, since then, it has been announced that "Understanding Entropy" has become a finalist for both the Hugo *and* the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. If this is a just universe, I will have more good news to report to you later this year. □

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By D. Douglas Fratz

Greg Bear creates *New Legends* with an original Hard SF treasure trove.

Editor Bear prepares to land an ambitious anthology in your local bookstore. Cover art by Jim Harris.

THEME ANTHOLOGIES ARE RARELY FOUND OUTside the science fiction field, but represent a noble tradition in the genre, possibly because SF is an idea-based genre whose stories represent ongoing dialogs between authors discussing the ideas that make up the SF canon. Hundreds of such anthologies can be found in the history of SF, based on themes ranging broadly from the sublime to the ridiculous. Many theme anthologies consist of reprinted fiction, or use a handful of reprints as the core of an otherwise original anthology. The most important theme anthologies, however—Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* springs to mind—have been created by ambitious editors seeking wholly original fiction.

Greg Bear is clearly ambitious editing *New Legends* (Tor Books, Hardcover, 384 pp., $22.95), his first theme anthology. The fifteen stories and one essay are all original works. What Bear has sought is "science fiction with soul," ambitious, literary hard SF that focuses primarily on issues of the human condition. Bear has obviously given careful thought to both the stories and the order in which they are presented. The result is an anthology that is more than the sum of its parts.

"Elegy" by rising young author Mary Rosenblum tells the story of a young brain surgeon who continues her prematurely senile mother's medical research seeking to use genetically altered squid neurons to replace injured brain tissue. It is an ambitious, emotional story, marred by the faulty assumption that the loss of a few neurons can lead to irreversible brain dysfunction, as well as a clumsy attempt to delay reader precognition of the somewhat obvious ending.

Sterling Blake, in "A Desperate Calculus," on the other hand, is nearly perfect in hiding the surprise ending to a powerful story about an environmental scientist who, along with his wife, is desperately seeking to save genetic information from endangered species mere hours before Third World humanity irretrievably destroys it. The story represents a most convincing statement in support of the "Earth First!" viewpoint that humanity is a blight infesting the planet. James Stevens-Arce's well-written but less ambitious "Scenes From a Future Marriage" is the angst-filled story of the decline of the marriage between two incompatible individuals, containing only a minor speculative element.

In "Coming of Age in Karhide," Ursula K. LeGuin returns to the world of Gethen from *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in a first-person vignette about a young person entering kemmer (the time of sexual differentiation and sexual activity) for the first time. Although short, it is a welcome return by one of the field's finest authors to one of the touchstone creations of SF. "High Abyss" by Gregory Benford tells of an alien mathematician and scientist seeking to discover the physical nature of its truly strange world. Benford uses his advanced knowledge of physics to create a story from a viewpoint so alien that unsophisticated SF readers will find it impenetrable.

Paul J. McAuley, another of SF's best new authors, contributes "Recording Angel," a far-future tale set on an artificial world reminiscent of that created by Gene Wolfe in *Book of the New Sun*. Although it's an ambitious creation, the verisimilitude of McAuley's story suffers from too many elements that feel like high fantasy.

"When Strangers Meet" is a short but effective story of alieness by Sonia Orin Lyris. It is followed by "The Day the Aliens Came," story by Robert Sheckley in his typically subtle tongue-in-cheek style about numerous and sundry aliens inundating the everyday life of normal citizens.

Carter Scholz's "Radiance" is another angst-filled near-future tale, about a theoretical physicist forced by lack of career opportunities to work on a space-based weapon project. He works for a tyrannical but politically well-connected lab director on a project that he knows is a money-wasting dead end. The story is followed by an essay by Gregory Benford about his own experiences at a Federal weapons lab directed by Edward Teller of Manhattan Project fame. Benford's anecdotes and observations further heighten the verisimilitude of Scholz's story. "The Red Blaze is the Morning" by Robert Silverberg tells of an aging archeologist seeking evidence of an ancient civilization in Turkey who begins to receive auditory and visual messages that he thinks are hallucinations from overwork, but ends up being from a human from a far-future after humanity is nearly extinct. It is a story filled with melancholy and despair, like many others in the book.

George Alec Effinger's "One" has the feel of a story written some decades ago. It is about a couple who head out to the stars to seek alien life on planet after planet, but they don't find any. Their plan to find life and return to

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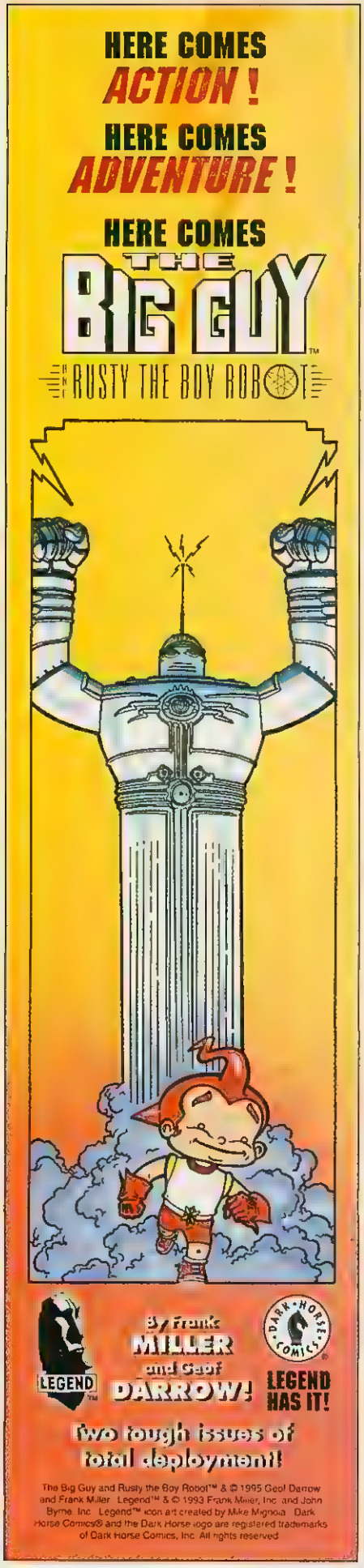

Earth with the glorious news never materializes. It is a touching story marred by a pietistic ending that isn't convincing. "Scarecrow" by Poul Anderson is the quintessential *Analog* problem story about a man and woman sent to investigate a malfunctioning community of exploratory robots on Hyperion, the geologically unstable moon of Saturn. To survive after they wreck their spaceship, the protagonists must determine why the robots are acting strangely. The fact that the female is devoutly Christian helps the agnostic male protagonist to figure it out—the robots have created a religion to explain their chaotic environment. The obvious message of the story would have seemed more profound if the story felt less contrived.

The anthology ends on a high note with Greg Egan's "Wang's Carpets." Egan is one of SF's best new authors, and provides further proof with this story set on one of many starships of trans-humans involved in a Diaspora to seek life on other planets. The characters in Egan's story are not physical humans, but machine-stored personalities awakened by their ship as they approach their first planet. There is a fine story as they uncover the secret of a seemingly simple life form, but the real strength is the characters, who sometimes inhabit their cloned bodies, sometimes inhabit strange alien bodies, and oftentimes interact only in virtual-reality venues with geometry and physical laws that bear little relation to reality. Egan's world merges Bruce Sterling's Shaper/Mechanist universe with William Gibson's cyberspace, and takes it ten steps farther. Despite their alieness, the characters are clearly human, and totally convincing, like brilliant royalty for whom intellectual pursuits and philosophical discussions are the finest of leisure. Reading Egan's story makes all of the huge body of SF that is set centuries into the future but where human beings zip around the galaxy with twentieth century genomes and consciousness seem ludicrous.

Fifteen stories and one essay, all of them good, some excellent, and one that represents the best SF has to offer. Bear has done a remarkably fine job in creating an anthology that demonstrates that the science fiction form can be used to make profound statements.

***Slow River** by Nicola Griffith, Ballantine del Ray, 352 pp., $18.00 U.S.*

One of the themes that science fiction, particularly hard SF, deals with best is responsibility. Actions have consequences; we live in a causal universe. Good intentions are meaningless to Nature, and SF adeptly shows us this basic truth.

However, this perspective, while ideal for stories of science and engineering, is traditionally avoided in the realm of "human" concerns—love, family, relationships.

Nicola Griffith challenges that tradition in her new novel, *Slow River*. Griffith puts her theme center stage and relentlessly shows us the consequences of denying responsibility and the reasons for actively embracing it.

Lore—Lorien van de Oest—is a member of one of the wealthiest corporate families on Earth. The Van de Oests hold the patents on

Books to Watch For

Nanotech Dreams, edited by Elton Elliot (Baen). In the microminiaturized future, virus-sized self-replicating machines will make all things possible, as Poul Anderson, Gregory Benford, Charles Sheffield, Greg Bear and others endeavor to prove.

Wizard's Heir, by Daniel Hood (Ace). In this sequel to frequent *SF Age* contributor Hood's debut novel, the detective wizard Liam Rhenford returns, with his faithful sidekick Fanuilh. Only they can stop the destruction of the goddess Bellona's temples.

How to Save the World, edited by Charles Sheffield (Tor). The award-winning author dons an editor's hat, daring SF writers to use tomorrow's technology to solve today's ills. Rising to the challenge are Larry Niven, James P. Hogan, Jerry Pournelle and others.

Full Spectrum 5, edited by Jennifer Hershey, Tom Dupree, and Janna Silverstein (Bantam Spectra). The latest installment of the award-winning series, featuring stories by the likes of Michael Bishop, Gene Wolfe, Karen Joy Fowler and over two dozen other SF luminaries.

Sword and Sorceress XII, edited by Marion Zimmer Bradley (DAW). Darkover's Grand Dame presents more stories of women of power. Presenting magic and mayhem from twenty-two tale-spinners such as Mercedes Lackey, Diana Paxson, Jennifer Roberson, and Elizabeth Waters.

His Share of Glory: The Solo Science Fiction of Cyril Kornbluth by C. M. Kornbluth (NESFA Press). He was one of SF's finest collaborators, but on his own Kornbluth wrote classics like "The Marching Morons" and "The Little Black Bag." Experience them anew.

Headcrash, by Bruce Bethke (Warner Aspect). The creator of the term "cyberpunk" goes cruising for roadkill along the information superhighway, and finds the hip tale of Jack Burroughs, who is either a complete dork or the coolest cybernetic surfer ever.

A Nomad of the Time Streams: The Eternal Champion, Volume 4, by Michael Moorcock (White Wolf). Oswald Bastable is a pivotal figure of the alternate realities of the multiverse. Follow him through strange and infinite worlds in this revised omnibus edition.

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Which is not to say they are saints. This is business, profits are vital. The price for their services, which are second to none, is steep enough that cheaper knockoffs of their custom bugs look very attractive. The consequences of this gray and black market penny-pinching are shown throughout the novel, in a coda Griffith returns to again and again. The substitution of Van de Oest bugs with inferior—but cheaper—versions causes breakdowns, failures, environmental chaos, death. One might castigate the Van de Oests for merciless capitalism, but one cannot excuse those who gamble on outcomes in order to keep costs down, particularly since the victims never have a say one way or the other.

At the opening of the novel, Lore wakes up naked and injured in a strange city. She has been kidnapped, held for ransom, and tortured, and her appeals for help, telecast globally, are apparently unheeded. Because of a breakdown in the family system, those she believed she could trust totally have failed her, leaving her stranded and vulnerable.

She finds a rescuer, Spanner. Spanner takes her in, heals her physical wounds, and draws her into a life Lore has never known, a marginal shadow-life in the black market. She finds herself adapting to it with terrifying ease. Spanner is a thief, a liar, a scam artist. She uses people and systems regardless of consequences, doing whatever is necessary to survive. Spanner sees herself—her psyche, her soul, her body, her skills—as no more than tools to facilitate survival. She is, however, human, and while all tools break when misused, humans do not necessarily stop functioning when they break.

Though Lore is fascinated by this shadow-life, she soon realizes she cannot live this way, and engineers her escape. The trick is to leave the shadows without coming into the light. She does not want her family to find her because she no longer trusts them. Lore must relearn trust, which is the most difficult of things to recover once lost.

The novel unfolds in three distinct threads—Lore's childhood, up to her kidnapping; her shadow-life with Spanner; and the life she creates for herself when she leaves Spanner. Each strand represents a different level of self-knowledge, aspects of Lore's developing personality, all seeking integration. Griffith manages this with rare skill. The novel's *gestalt* is realized with depth and subtlety. The science is right, the understanding of interlocking systems is viscerally correct. *Slow River* is graceful and seductive. The background and foreground work seamlessly in support of the theme.

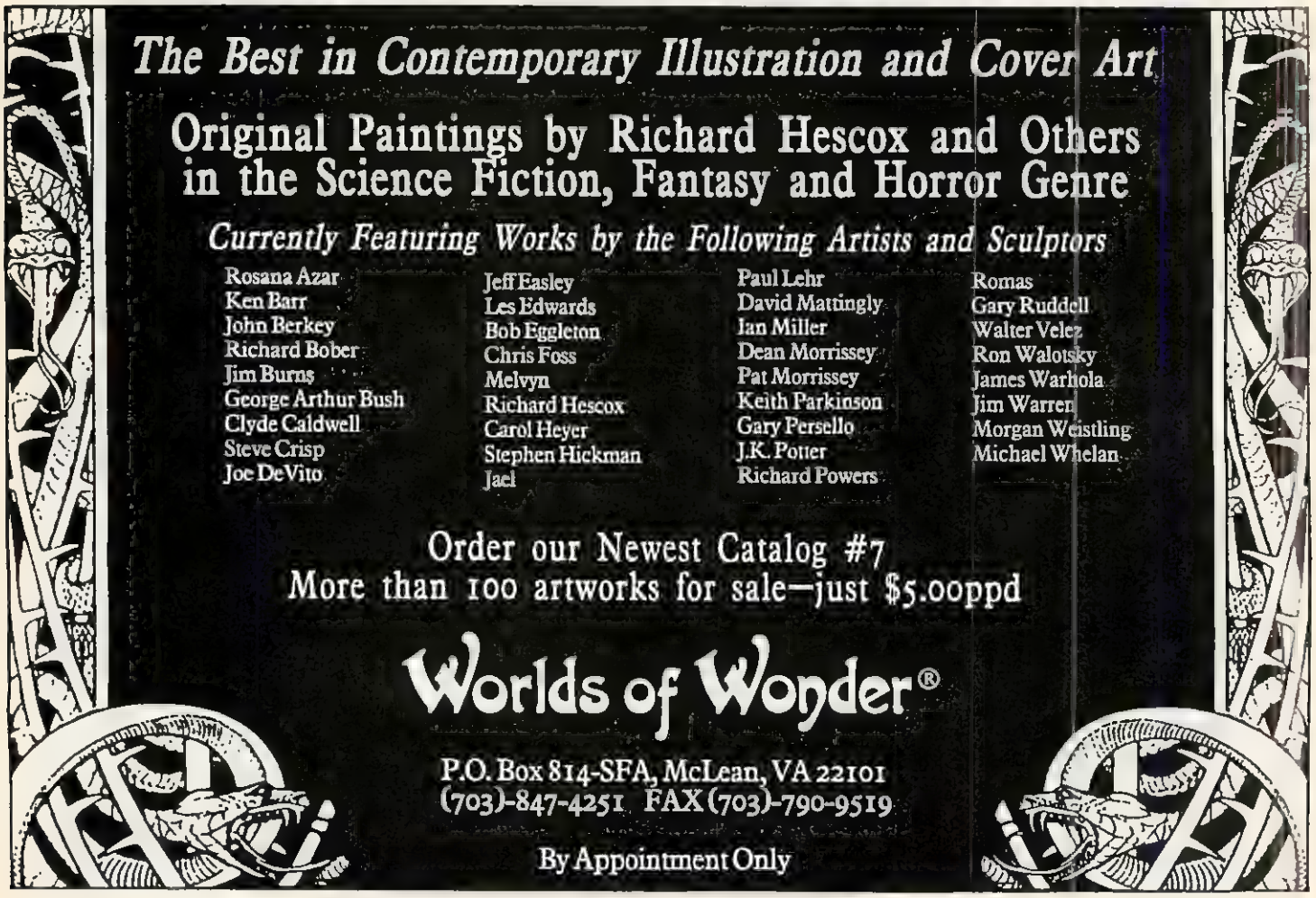
And it is that theme which is its underlying strength. She shows that we have the capacity to build complex systems that work well, that we are competent to create solutions, that our tools *can* make a better world—but not if we quail at the concomitant responsibilities. This is as true of families as for nations.

Which leads to the conclusion that *Slow River* is a humanistic novel. So it is, deeply humanistic, and therefore not the sort of book normally regarded as hard science fiction. But science is, ultimately, a human endeavor. Lore's story embodies all things human, including science and the moral imperatives which fall out of its proper practice. It is the best kind of science fiction and, finally, the best kind of literature. In the end it is reaffirming of our humanness.

Mark W. Tiedemann

***Feersum Endjinn**, by Iain Banks, Bantam, 320 pp, trade P.B., $12.95.*

As a writer, Iain Banks appears to lead a strange double life. His highly acclaimed first novel, *The Wasp Factory*, evoked comparison with the work of another Ian (McEwan). Certainly the subject matter—disturbed adolescents, unsavory sexual practices; an overall feeling of very British malaise filtered through Banks' very Scottish sensibility—all but assured that *The Wasp Factory* be shelved



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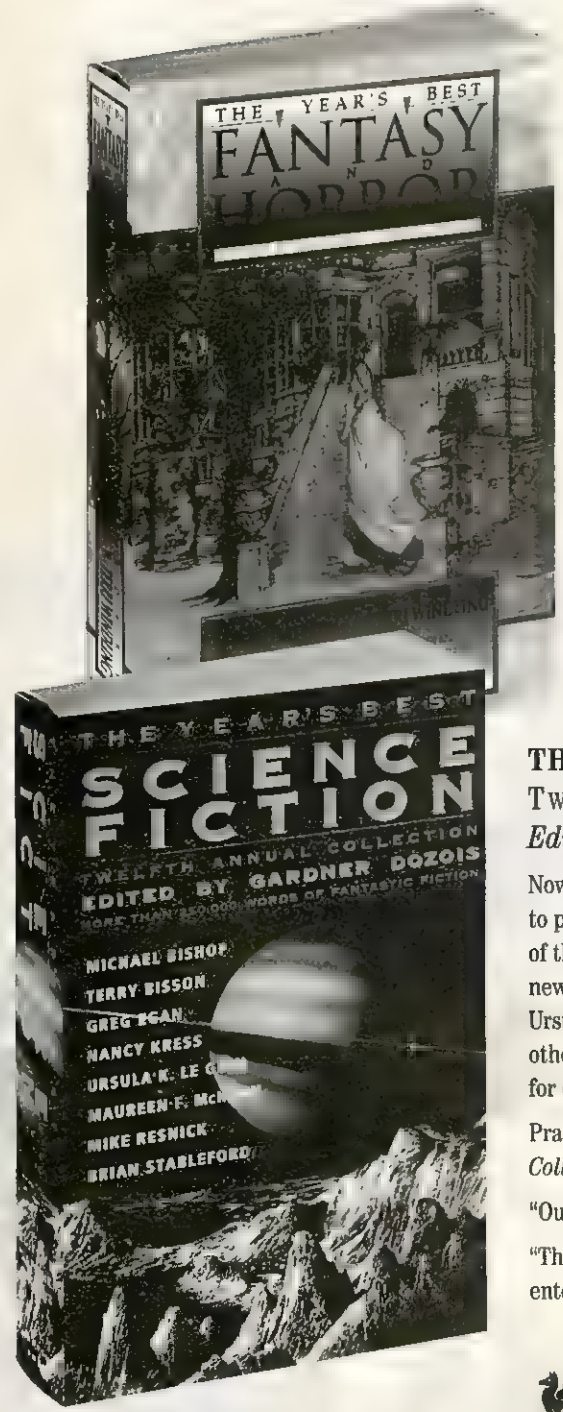

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next to *The Cement Garden* in reader's minds. I found *The Wasp Factory* to be slightly overwrought, but its Gothic high camp was brightened by humor (an element missing from most of Ian McEwan's work), a verbal puckishness that betrayed the author's literary ambitions. These ambitions became more clear with Banks' subsequent books—*Walking on Glass*, *The Bridge*, *Espedair Street*, *Canal Dreams*, *The Crow Road*, *Complicity*—works that clawed at the hidebound conventions of the novel, so that readers could glimpse traces of magical realism, science fiction, classic English ghost stories, even the specter of James Joyce, beneath their rather standard 1980s-issue New Fiction logos. *This* Iain Banks is rather like a Scottish Steve Erickson: hip, literate, urbane, garnering good reviews and the readers they bring.

So: on the one hand we have a portrait of the artist as a bright young thing, doing the Po-Mo rag with the best of them. But on the *other* hand, we have Iain Banks, Science Fiction Auteur—the author of half a dozen books that can in no way be construed as anything but *what they are*, viz., supremely elegant, darkly sophisticated space operas.

Feersum Endjinn, Banks' newest book, follows *Consider Phlebas*, *The Player of Games*, *Use of Weapons*, *The State of the Art*, and *Against a Dark Background*, all mordant, superbly stylized science fiction novels. *Feersum Endjinn* is space opera in the truest sense: high drama played for high stakes by high-ranking people in colorful exotic costumes, complete with gargantuan sets that might have been designed by Piranesi & Company, and extended arias written in a dense patois that owes as much to Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* as it does to *Finnegans Wake*.

Feersum Endjinn is set on Earth some millennia in the future, when the planet has become a vast ruin littered with the detritus of earlier generations. There are immense living-machines; retro-fitted humans and talking ants; mammoth buildings and underground facilities housing near- forgotten technologies: nano, macro, VR and FTL. All but the most privileged persons have been given implants that enable them to access the thoughts of others as well as a vast information storehouse known as the data corpus. Banks has some fun with this, as with many of the other standard genre trappings.

Gadfium's status decreed that she was above the need for an implanted direct status link, being one of those valued souls whose mind must be left free from the distractions of constant intercommunication to concentrate on undiluted thought, unless they chose to access the data corpus by some external means. She knew she must accept this, but even so, oscillated between a guilty pride in her privileged position and an intermittent frustration that she so often had to rely on others to furnish her with so many of the details her work required.

The plot is head-throbbingly complex. It involves (among other things) the threat of Earth's passage through an interstellar dust-cloud; the multiple assassinations of Count Alandre Sessine VII, who is running out of VR and real-time lives in which to catch his murderer; the heretofore unsuccessful efforts of those on Earth to reestablish contact with the scientists and others who left them, via spaceship, some time before; the arrival of a girl, a human *tabula rasa*, who may be the emissary from those very celestial voyagers; and the adventures of a teller, an idiot savant who can access the near-infinite repository of human memories within the cryptosphere.

Banks deftly weaves together these disparate plot-threads—the book really *is* a page-turner—and even the requisite info-dumping (of which there is a great deal) is handled with extraordinary grace and humor.

Along with Samuel R. Delany, Iain Banks is one of the very few authors who can pen a pure science fiction novel (as opposed to science fantasy) that is also beautifully, beautifully written. And as a prose stylist, Banks ranks among the very best, in any genre. If there is a tiny worm in this lovely apple, it is this: *Fearsum Endjinn* itself is almost a repository of the echoes of so many other books that it becomes a kind of name game, albeit a highly sophisticated one.

Of course it may be beside the point whether or not Banks intended his work to bring all these to mind. *Feersum Endjinn* is a virtuoso performance in its own right. But

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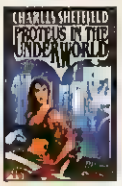

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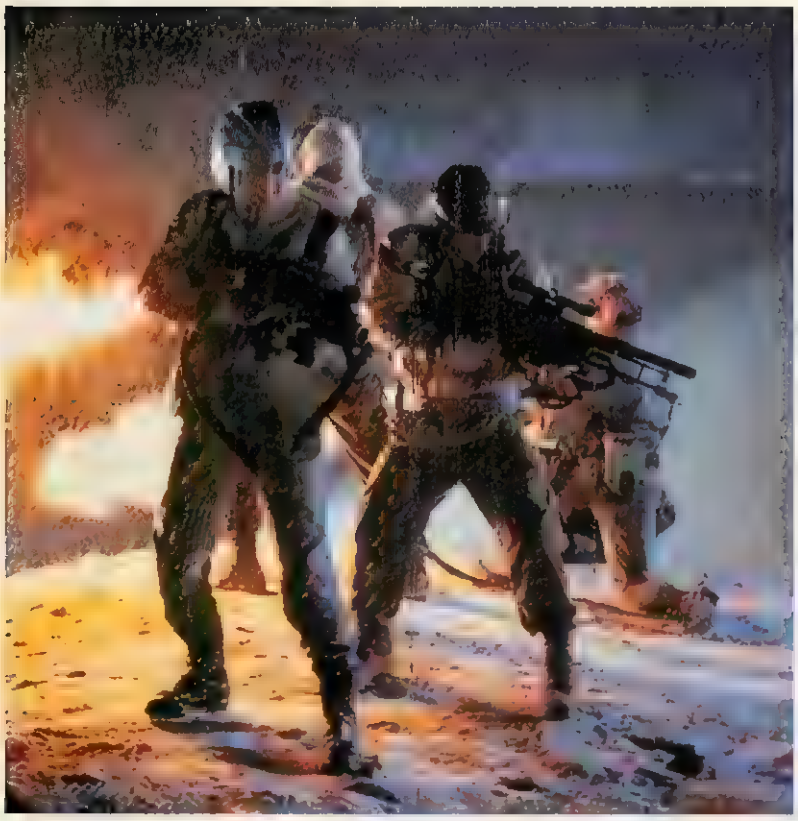
By Dan Perez

Dan O'Bannon brings Philip K. Dick's nightmare visions to life in *Screamers.*



Jessica (Jennifer Rubin) and Ace (Andy Lauer) confront the nightmare creations of SF's most paranoid writer in Triumph Films' Screamers.

FIRST OFF, DAN O'BANNON WANTS YOU TO KNOW that the original title of his screenplay was *Dragon's Teeth*, taken from the Greek myths of Cadmus and Jason, wherein a slain dragon's teeth are sown in the ground, spawning armed warriors.

"Producers generally have bleeding egos," he states. "And they'll do almost anything to crowbar their own creative contribution into a film. If someone's ego is sufficiently wounded, they lose sight of the end result, which is an audience watching a picture. It's not that [producers] don't care—they're no longer able to think about what is the best result for a film."

It's a sore spot for O'Bannon, who has written some of cinema's best-known science fiction features, including *Dark Star* (cowritten with John Carpenter while the two were still at the University of Southern California's film school), *Alien*, *Total Recall* (with Ronald Shusett and Gary Goldman), *Lifeforce* and his first directorial effort, the comedy-horror film *The Return of the Living Dead.*

O'Bannon's newest project is *Screamers*, adapted from the novella "Second Variety" by Philip K. Dick. In the 1953 novella, American and Russian soldiers do battle across the bleak, ash-covered wastes of war-torn Earth, aided by machines called claws: small robotic hunter-killers. The self-replicating claws (called Screamers in the movie) begin to change, however, learning to mimic their human creators, and suddenly Screamers become a threat to both nationalities.

O'Bannon's script updates the conflict, changing the setting to planet Sirius B, where a ten-year war between the New Economic Bloc, a mining consortium, and the Alliance, a federation of mine workers and geoscientists, has ravaged the landscape. Peter Weller (*The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai*, *RoboCop*) plays the role of Colonel Hendricksson, an Alliance commander.

Screamers is O'Bannon's second adaptation of a Philip K. Dick story, the first being *Total Recall*, which was based on Dick's short story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale." A longtime Dick fan, O'Bannon waited for years to see the *Screamers* project finally produced. "Back around '79 or '80," he recalls, "I was approached by a young producer named Daniel Gilbertson, who had acquired the rights to "Second Variety," and asked me if I knew it. I said yeah, I was very familiar with it, since childhood. He asked me if I wanted to do a script adaptation of it. I said OK, and I did. Then, subsequently, Gilbertson allowed the rights to lapse and according to our deal, the rights lapsed to me, including the rights to the Dick story, and so I made a deal with [executive producer] Chuck Fries' company, and at that point I lost track of the deal until these new people turned up."

The "new people" were with the Fuji 8 Co., Ltd, who joined forces with Fries Film Company, Triumph Films and Allegro Films to finance and produce the film. The joint Canadian-American production shot on location at sand and cement quarries in and around Montreal, as well as Montreal's Olympic Stadium.

"Second Variety" is another of Philip K. Dick's examinations of what it means to be human and the dividing line between intelligent machines and human beings. "In 'Second Variety,'" O'Bannon notes, "Dick really dipped into his nightmares. John W. Campbell, Jr.'s "Who Goes There?" is the first story I'm personally aware of that makes anything of that issue: the notion that amongst this group of people is planted a monstrous impostor, who can imitate any of them at will and will pick them off one by one unless they can discover which of them are real and which are not. Terrifying story. Powerful story. I'm not aware if John W. Campbell ever talked much about how he came up with that story, and he was a science fiction writer of many broad talents. I don't think he ever wrote anything like it before or since, that I'm aware of.

"Phil Dick, coming along a decade or two later—that issue was central to his entire life and psyche. Whereas Campbell may have come up with the idea as something of a lark, to frighten people, Phil Dick, according to his own writing, speeches and interviews, had always been tormented since he was a child by the issue of what was real and what was not real. As a kid, I read Dick as a tremendous source of tremendous imaginative delight. I always imagined writers as these lofty, omniscient people who thought of things from the depth of their wisdom

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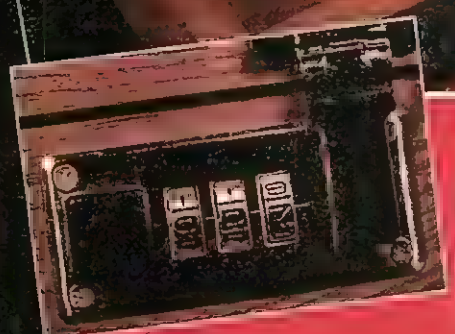

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A deadly Screamer, special effects make-up by Adrien Morot of Montreal, Canada.

and ended up writing these things for fun, as I was reading for fun. In fact, from what I can figure out from reading things by and about Phil Dick, he was in fact a borderline schizophrenic. Schizophrenia, of course, is a condition in which you lose touch with reality—the world becomes a sort of projective fantasy of your inner space. People who are borderline get what you might call a flavoring or a touch of this in their psyche. To Phil Dick it assumed the form of a disturbing conviction that the reality he saw around him was a false facade, and that there was something else underneath that was the genuine article, if he could only figure out what it was. This became his central important concern in all his science fiction writing, forever. Since, on top of that, he was also a genius, he was able to produce the most remarkable body of imaginative writing out of this concern.

"Whereas somebody like John Campbell, or for that matter myself might dabble in something like this occasionally for the fun and stimulation you get out of it, we can only take an idea like that so far. Phil Dick took it, in his various stories, about as far as it went. In the case of "Second Variety," it was the furthest reach of his fears in this concern."

O'Bannon's reverence for Dick's work made adapting "Second Variety" for the screen a challenge. "My principal concern in coming to this piece of material was how to render the inner thought space of the hero visible or known to the audience. A lot of the story takes place inside his own head, and in a movie, that's not so easy to do. I handled that by adding a second character who he can talk to. That was simple enough. So instead of this becoming the journey of one man it became the journey of two.

"Whenever I adapt somebody else's material, I'm always concerned to preserve whatever is best or most important about that material. I see it as an adapter's obligation to

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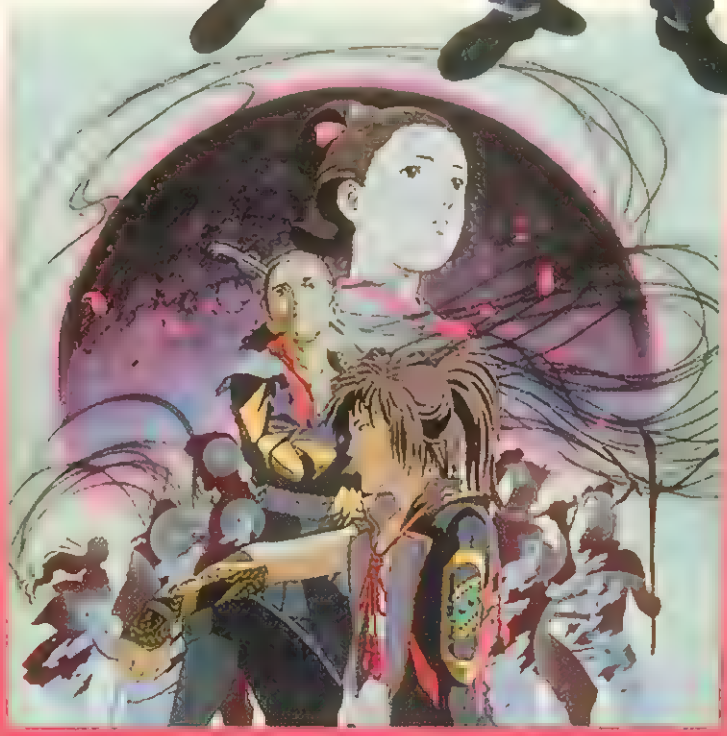

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keep as much as he can of the original and I see it as his right to change as much as he wants to. But from a lifetime of looking at films adapted from books, I've not been impressed by the extent to which most film adapters try to hang onto what's good about their source. So when I sit down to adapt something, I'm always particularly concerned to hang onto everything possible from the original author, in terms of specific scenes, characters and events, and also in terms of the essential quality or flavor of the original author.

"In the case of Phil Dick, since I loved his stuff so much, I was especially determined to do so. Now if you look at *Blade Runner*, you'll see that the adapter there simply threw the original to the wind: he didn't have any interest in it. There wasn't even any reason to acquire *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in order to make that screenplay. I have some sympathy for the screenwriter in that case because Phil Dick presents extraordinary challenges to any screenwriter in terms of adapting. He pulls off tricks on the page that are only possible because it's a literary work. When you start translating this as a concrete reality that you can look at with your eyeball, all of a sudden some of his tricks become visible. His business of switching back and forth between alternate realities sometimes is rather poorly patched and it's less obvious on the page than when you have to see it on the screen.

Colonel Hendrickson (Peter Weller), Ace (Andy Lauer) and David examine the ruins of what was once a city on a distant mining planet, destroyed in a decade of brutality by never-ending warfare. Special effects by Buzz Image Group of Montreal, Canada.

"The essential solution that the adapter of *Blade Runner* came up with was to throw away the book. He couldn't stand the heat—he wasn't up to the material. The couple of times I've adapted Phil Dick, I've always taken it as my duty and my challenge never to throw away what's best about Phil Dick, but whenever he throws me a ringer, to simply do what I have to do, take as much time as it takes and think as hard as I have to think to keep it.

"When I change something in Phil Dick, I always make sure to change something that's of secondary interest. When I add something new, I always add something that doesn't

Continued on page 101

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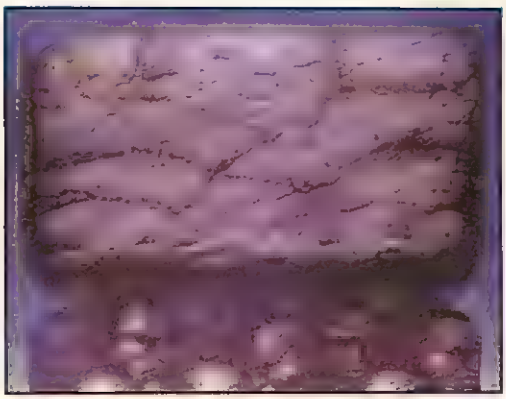

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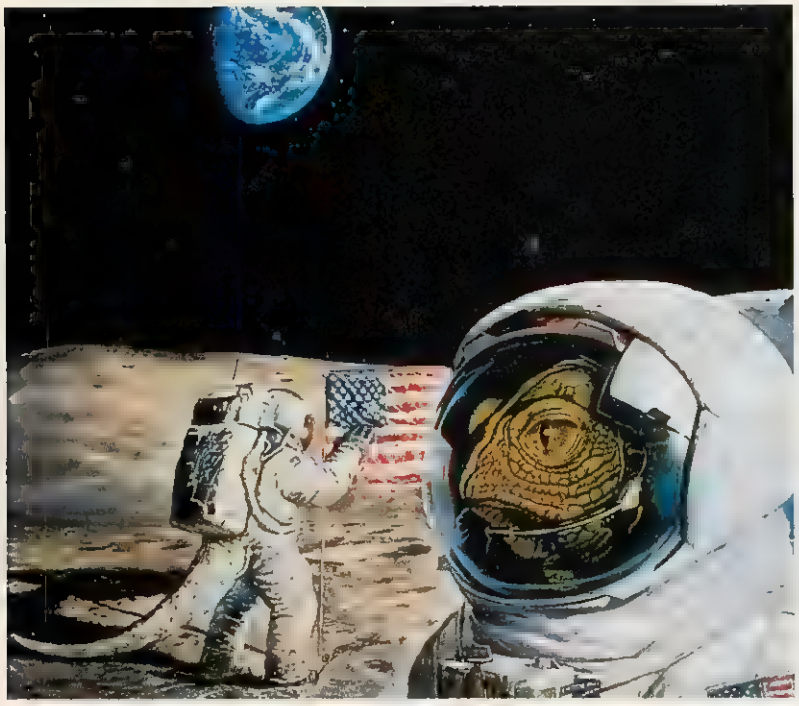
By Arlan Andrews and Yoji Kondo

The grass is always greener on the other side of the universe.



On an alternate Earth, mankind may have evolved from lizards instead of apes. Bob Eggleton captures a conquest of the Moon that might have been in For All What Kind.

"LISTEN," WROTE POET E. E. CUMMINGS, "THERE'S a hell of a good universe next door; let's go." Could he have been right? All of us at times have dreamed of alternate worlds in which our lives might have followed a smoother track; the literature of SF is filled with a litany of what might have beens. But could this metaphysical issue be more than just metaphor? We decided to find out.

Arlan Andrews manages Advanced Manufacturing Initiatives at Sandia Labs and will soon be vice president of VIGA Technologies Corp., marketing the world's leading VR applications system. Yoji Kondo is the director of a geosynchronous space observatory at NASA and is also professor of space sciences at George Mason University. Under the pseudonym of Eric Kotani, he has coauthored, with John Maddox Roberts, *Acts of God*, *The Island Worlds*, *Between the Stars*, and *Delta Pavonis*.

KONDO: Defining what we mean by parallel worlds is an important step forward in our discussion. You are referring to parallel worlds implicit in quantum mechanics, I think. The possibilities of parallel worlds derive from the famous Schroedinger's cat. Here is the story of that cat. A cat is placed in an opaque box. There is a radioactive material with a half-life of, say, five minutes in the box. If the material decays in five minutes, the possibility of which is precisely fifty-fifty, it will activate the release of poison gas that will kill the cat. The probability that the cat is alive after five minutes is 50-50. But you will not know whether the cat is alive or dead until you open the box to see. Some quantum theorists maintain that the cat is neither dead nor alive until you open the box. The quantum mechanical wave function that describes that cat "collapses" at that point to turn into a live cat or dead one when you open the box. Theorists further speculate that, of the two possible worlds—the one in which the cat is dead or the other in which the cat is alive—you will be (aware of) living in only one of them, although an alternate you will be living in the other world. The cat is so named after Schroedinger, who developed quantum mechanics. Heisenberg, who formulated the Uncertainty Principle, also quite independently invented quantum mechanics concurrently with Schroedinger. This is a pictorial exposition of the branching off of the worlds. The human behavior—and the behavior of a society containing billions of human beings—is vastly more complex and unpredictable than that cat in the black box, so the world is branching off into billions and trillions of alternate worlds every instant. We are not aware of the existence of all those other branches; you surely do not know which way the world will be branching off the next moment. It's a fun world, isn't it? But if we mean one or two or three or, anyway, *limited* numbers of worlds into which we may branch out or we may be coexisting with, then we have to come up with reasons as to why that is so. I have some ideas how that may be so. Some authors have also discussed such possibilities. Robert Heinlein has done that well. Arlan, would you care to comment on that?

ANDREWS: In *Analog*, ten or fifteen years ago, Michael McCollum had a story, "A Greater Infinity," which had that at the beginning, at the Big Bang, that the parallel universes are created then. Ours is just one of a very, very large number short of infinity. But that rather than parallel worlds existing as a result of whether or not I move my wine glass to the right or to the left, and branching off into billions of worlds in the future, he had them all created at the Big Bang. And therefore some of the universes would have different physical laws than we have. The physical constants would have different values—gravity might be something else, they might have other laws than we do, they might have other forces than we do. And to me, that's more appealing. I really refuse to believe that nature will create an entire universe depending on whether I choose this moment to clear my throat or not, thereby displacing some atoms, which a thousand years from now will cause somebody else to do something else, starting another world. I've never seen anything else in nature that seems to be so wasteful of energy in creating matter.

KONDO: Multiple worlds created in just one Big Bang, is that what you mean?

ANDREWS: Yes, that appeals to me. That doesn't make it true.

KONDO: For example, in the case of Robert Heinlein, he had at least three novels in which he discussed the possibility of parallel worlds, one of which was a fantasy, actually, *Glory Road*. Then he talked about such things in *The Number of the Beast*, which he called fantasy rather

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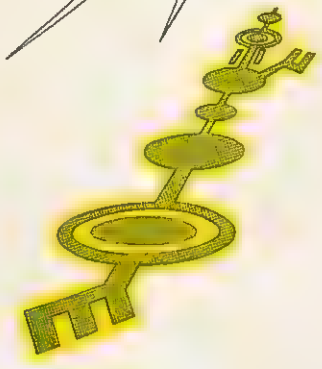

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than science fiction, and then he again talked about it in his last book, *To Sail Beyond the Sunset*. He talked about parallel universes except that he talked about only a limited number of those. He calls them, I think, "known universes." It's really not practical to talk about infinite varieties into which you are branching out. One could stipulate that it branches out occasionally only at some critical point, and that there is a cusp in history, where branching out becomes possible. It may be moving this glass here, that fork there, or it may be something else at some critical point. Many things you have done in the past, well, maybe you could have gone either way, you might think, but perhaps we were compelled to do what we did do. However, there may be points at which it is truly uncertain which way we are going to go. And that could be the basis for writing fictions speculating about parallel universes.

SF AGE: Other than wish fulfillment, as a desire for parallel worlds—after all, we'd all like to know what would have happened had our failures been successes, if we'd made different choices and so forth—what rational scientific theory or concept would support the potentiality for these worlds, the possibility of them? By what scientific reason would we imagine that these worlds might exist?

KONDO: There is an uncertainty inherent to the existence of any body. We have probability patterns associated with physical existence. In the case of human beings, the probability of one's being somewhere at a given time is so large that for all practical purposes, you'd think you are there. But when you start dealing with electrons, for instance, it's really not clear where it is. That's why if you send an electron beam, you could literally send it through two adjacent slots simultaneously, but this has to do with the wave nature of matter, so I should perhaps limit myself to the uncertainty of whether or not electrons thrown *this* way might end up *that* way. And there is a small but a finite probability that the electron may not end up where you're sending it. So, the greater the mass, the less or smaller the probability of its not doing what it's supposed to be doing. This does not mean that something with the mass of a glass of Coke may not be elsewhere. It has at least a small probability of not being right here. This is known as the Uncertainty Principle, first enunciated by Heisenberg back in, I think, the '20s.

SF AGE: How does that then take us to the idea of another universe, a parallel universe, in which we do not exist and other events are happening? What's the next step?

KONDO: In theory, if we're branching out all the time, then there are an infinite number of universes that exist, not necessarily parallel to our world in the sense that people talk about, but continuously branching out. The problem with that idea is that we are not aware of what's going on in those other branches. We have only one branch, in which we are stuck.

ANDREWS: That's another interpretation.

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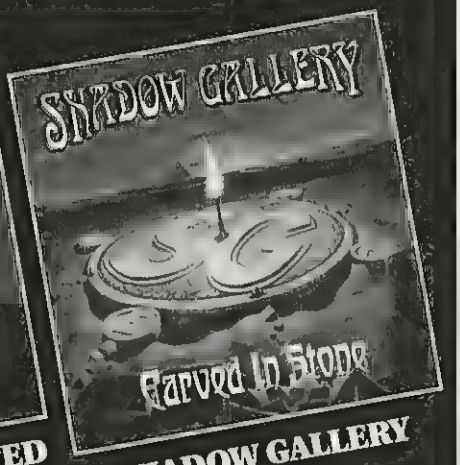

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Well, I've also discovered the Principle of Violation of Parity. This happens to socks. You never lose two socks. You only lose one. The physical manifestation of this can be seen along the highway as you drive home tonight. You will see, I predict, one shoe along the side of the highway. But never two. And, as facetious as it sounds, I sometimes think that this is a manifestation of the basic perversity of the universe. There is always one shoe, but never two. You always lose one sock, but never two. There seem to be perverse patterns that affect human beings. It might be that that particular day, as Yoji would say, the car decided to keep its keys in a parallel universe. When you do certain kinds of solutions in equations, you get an infinite series of solutions, each of which is equally valid. They're called Eigen value solutions. When you solve a wave equation, or vibrations, or anything else like that, you get a whole series. Each of these infinite series of equations is a solution. In the real world, to get the solution to an equation, we add all those up in an infinite series of solutions. By analogy, it might be that the real nature of the universe is to sum up all its divergent or parallel or alternate worlds together, and if you're a godlike figure, you can look at those and say, "Reality comprises the infinite series solution of these things." However, anybody stuck in any one of those given Eigen values along the way doesn't get the whole picture. They think they do. They're self-consistent. Their laws work. But if you can take an n-dimensional step back and look at all those together, you'd say, "Aha! The nature of reality is really all this stuff. You poor human beings are stuck in one of the slices." If you're stuck in one little slice of reality, you think that that's all there is, but if you had the smarts, you could look over at the next packet of information, the next Eigen value that's parallel to you, and say, "My gosh! They're kind of like we are, only there's a little bit of difference." And the practical application of this, of course, is in science fiction. Some people get to make an entire career out of writing alternate history science fiction stories and books because they're frustrated with the progress of space exploration.

KONDO: What do you mean? There are people who think that the history book we read is an alternate version. The real history is not what we read in our textbooks. They are known as revisionist historians. It may be far-fetched, but sometimes it's really true that history is written to the convenience or to the wishes of the powers-that-be.

ANDREWS: At science fiction conventions over the last ten years, people have talked to me about this seriously, and I reflected it in the story. Many people have had a feeling the past ten years that things are not quite right. History is OK; it's just kind of strange. It feels like we're living in a strange, parallel time—for example, the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It seems to be an historical event that has started to affect all of history. We didn't

Continued on page 98

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Never forget the writers who helped build yesterday's tomorrows.

A. E. van Vogt changed the face of SF. Cover art to The World of Null-A *by Richard Powers.*

BY NEGLECTED SCIENCE FICTION WRITER I DO not mean someone whose star is only temporarily in eclipse or who is a comparative newcomer. I mean an exceptional writer of many years' standing whose accomplishments are recognized by discerning readers, who may even be a candidate for greatness, but who has few or no awards, poor sales, and is usually out of print. The publishers have forgotten him, but not all of the readers have.

Each of the writers discussed below is neglected in different but significant ways. And this list threatens to grow constantly, for reasons that have nothing to do with the carefully considered merits of the writers. Here, in no particular order, are ten writers who, some will say, have had their time and are out of fashion; but should not the SF readership be above such distractions? Is not SF, by its very nature, a literature for the ages? Should not its readership and its publishers at least aspire to see past mere temporal provincialisms? It is difficult to grow as a reader if important past works are not easily available. The saddest part is that this list could easily be three times as long, and that new candidates for it are increasing in numbers with every decade.

1. CHAD OLIVER (1928-1993) created anthropological science fiction. His training in anthropology permeated almost all his fiction, in which he achieved a compelling, graceful style of poetic, vigorous, and thoughtful storytelling.

One of the key ideas of his *Shadows in the Sun* (1954) is that humanoid intelligences are common in our galaxy, and that the differences between civilizations may be cultural, not physical. Nevertheless, Oliver allows the existence of wholly alien Others, "intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic," in H. G. Wells' famous words; but the Others are not the central problem in this involving story of a man's struggle to decide whether he should join the alien culture or stay home. Paul Ellery finally stays behind because it would be bad anthropology for him to go. He would be exchanging one set of cultural problems for another and would have to start from scratch. Character, plot, and science move dramatically forward at the same time, sparking implications left and right.

In *Unearthly Neighbors* (1960), we see even more pointedly that being alien is not just a physiological difference, but also one of culture and history overlaid on biology. The anthropological puzzle presented by the inhabitants of Sirius Nine is fascinatingly detailed, as are the lives of the investigators from our own future Earth. It's a wise novel, facing us with one of the central points of all literature—that we mostly do not know what we are under the overlay of civilization. No seeker of tense, absorbing narrative will be disappointed as the alternate humanity of this novel comes on the scene, and we wonder what is a human being—while feeling with harrowing dismay that we don't know who is the alien.

The Shores of Another Sea (1971) depicts the radically different Others only hinted at in *Shadows*. "Probably the best anthropological SF novel ever written—powerful, convincing, and dramatic," wrote fellow scientist-author Gregory Benford. Yet the book was not reviewed in any of the SF magazines, not even in *Analog*, where Oliver was well-known. Writing in *The New York Times*, the great Anthony Boucher called Oliver "a prime contender for the Heinlein-Clarke front rank of genuine science fiction, in which the science is as accurately absorbing as the fiction is richly human." SF's best and brightest—Damon Knight, Harlan Ellison, Frederik Pohl, Michael Bishop, Howard Waldrop, and many others—praised Oliver extravagantly. With *Shores* he fulfilled the promise of his earlier work, with a novel that Hemingway could not have bettered. His last two novels were historical fiction, *Broken Eagle* (1989) and *Cannibal Owl* (1994), and both were neglected by their publisher, despite the fact that the first won a major award.

Chad Oliver's SF is extremely rereadable. Even after a third or fourth reading of *Shores*, for example, one is startled by one's own differing reactions, including the sheer pleasure one derives from the beauty of the novels. In recent years I have learned that if I read a particular Oliver work only once, then I have not really read it. No Nebula or Hugo. A Grand Master who can now never receive that award.

2. A. E. VAN VOGT's (1912-) works exude a steel blue strangeness, at once in love with the stylized surfaces of technology but reminding us that barbarians are in control of the toys. His best works were the magazine stories of the 1940s, collected into book form in the '50s and '60s: *The Weapon Shops of Isher* (1951) and its sequel, *The Weapons Makers* (1952); *Empire of the Atom* (1957) and its sequel, *The Wizard of Linn* (1962). The well-known *Slan* (1951) and the first two World of Null-A novels—

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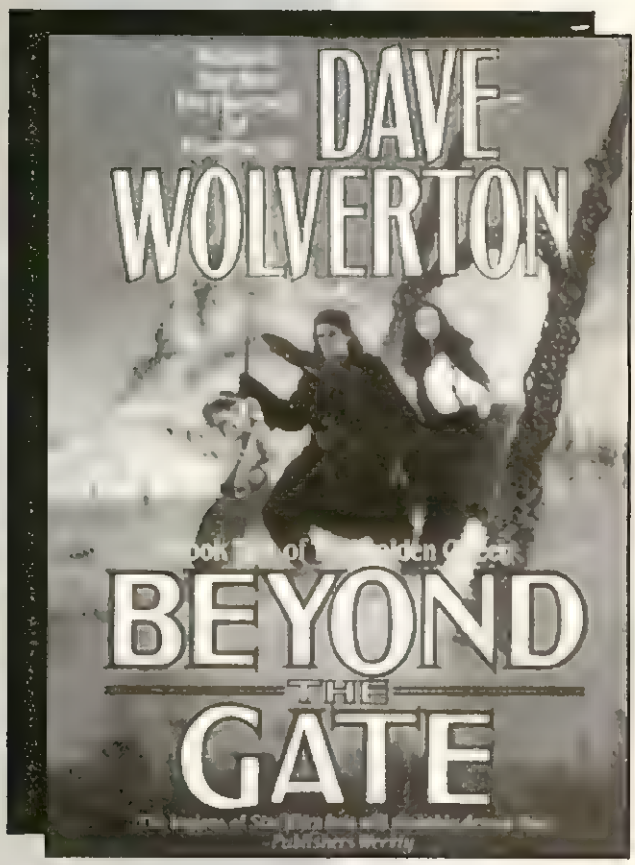

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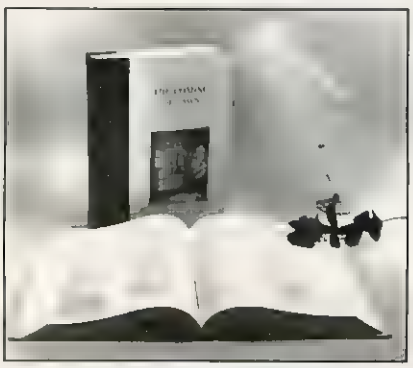

The Coming of Dawn, featured above, is one of NLP's recent deluxe hardbound anthologies.

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Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Anthologies published by the organization have included, *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, and *Of Diamonds and Rust*, among others.

The World of Null-A (1948) and *The Players of Null-A* (1956)—offer some of the most dreamlike enjoyments to be found in SF, beauties to be found nowhere else. *The Mixed Men* (1952) is vividly beautiful; *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* (1950) is better than any *Star Trek* story.

Yet today this author who helped make hardcover SF publishing in the 1950s a success is all but forgotten. His decline may have started with Damon Knight's destructive analysis of *The World of Null-A*, which may have been literally correct but pointless, given van Vogt's specific literary goals. Van Vogt's influence can clearly be seen in Alfred Bester's first two novels, especially in *The Stars My Destination* (1957); in the early work of Philip K. Dick, most obviously in *Solar Lottery* (1955) and *The World Jones Made* (1956); in the work of Charles L. Harness (probably his greatest disciple); in Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* (1959); and, now that I can look back across two decades as a writer, in my own *The Omega Point Trilogy* (1983). Here is one of the last living masters of SF's Golden Age of the 1940s, yet he has no Hugo, no Nebula, no Grand Master Nebula, and his work is nearly unavailable.

3. CHARLES L. HARNESS (1915-) is recognized as a living legend by all the major reference works on SF. *The Rose* (1953) and *The Paradox Men* (1953; definitive edition, Easton Press, 1992) are remarkable developments of van Vogtian SF: "wide-screen baroque," as Brian Aldiss has described them. Yet he has not a single award, and his supporters have to struggle to get his earlier work reprinted. His recent works, *Krono* (1988) and *Lurid Dreams* (1990), received enthusiastic reviews in both *Locus* and *The New York Times*, yet his publishers blamed Harness for the poor sales of his books, not themselves. His supporters—Brian Aldiss, Damon Knight, Michael Moorcock, and the many readers who haunt used bookstores for his editions (which are collector's items)—know better. His neglect, and the failure of publishers to present his work in the manner that it deserves, is baffling.

4. JAMES GUNN (1923-) has not been neglected as an historian and critic of SF, but these accomplishments have diverted attention from his exceptional fiction. In 1958, at the dawn of the space age, Gunn's story, "The Cave of Night," reached the center of popular culture when it was presented as a teleplay by Desilu Playhouse, with E. G. Marshall as the scientist and Lee Marvin starring as the astronaut! The story was part of Gunn's remarkable *Station in Space* (1958), a novel about the lives of astronauts during the early years of solar system exploration that not only catches the ambivalence of culture and politics to space exploration and foreshadows later '60s skepticism about the Moon program, but also presents space travel grimly, realistically, ironically, even mockingly—looking forward in certain ways to Barry N. Malzberg's later cycle of stories and novels

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about astronauts, of which the best known is the John W. Campbell Memorial Award-winning *Beyond Apollo* (1972).

Of Gunn's more than twenty other books, *The Joy Makers* (1961) has an icy clarity and a seductive plausibility that puts it at the top of the sociological school of SF that flowered in the 1950s. *Star Bridge* (1955), written with Jack Williamson, is a colorful space opera, filled with exciting imagery. *The Listeners* (1972) is still the definitive novel about radio contact with an alien civilization.

I single out *Station in Space* because of the way it has dated. SF novels are now beginning to date in a truly science fictional way. So-called dated SF works can well be regarded as "alternative histories," and suddenly their "datedness" disappears! Gunn's novel was as much about its own time as about the future it looked forward to, and that makes *Station in Space* a fascinating piece of cultural history. Although the ambition of much SF is to transcend the times in which it is written, the cultural setting in which a work is written is inescapable. SF should continue to speculate about possible futures, but as individual works date, they will acquire a double horizon—past ideals and hopes for the future contrasted, even at war with the constraints of the present in which the works are written. Gunn's novel seemed dated in the '70s, even though the space program in the book might well have been possible in the '50s. That program is beginning to happen in the '90s. And when all the social and personal details are the stuff of historical fiction, the ideas may still have been prophetic.

5. JAMES BLISH (1921-1975) wrote a faultless prose that captured what may be called "the pure science fictional feeling." Like van Vogt, he seemed to have tapped into what many readers expected science fiction to be—intellectual, questing, and turning on moments of insight and quiet grandeur. One of his most memorable books, *The Seedling Stars* (1957), haunts readers who come to it in their teens and twenties; and the book bestows the same satisfactions when reread at any age. The stories that make up this chronicle all deal with "pantropy," the biotech that adapts humanity to alien worlds rather than adapting those worlds to humanity. The wonderful, tragic, and sublime insights that weave through these stories make for a beautiful book. That nearly all of Blish's work is out of print is a great pity. The vast, noble *Cities in Flight* (1970) tetralogy, which first developed the theme of mobile space habitats, and the Hugo Award-winning *A Case of Conscience* (1958), a shattering examination of religious faith, should be permanent backlist items for bookstores.

6. WARD MOORE (1903-1978) wrote *Greener Than You Think* (1947) and *Bring the Jubilee* (1953). The first is a satirical ecological disaster novel; the second an alternate American history in which the South won the Civil War. He also wrote two justly famous stories, "Lot" and "Lot's Daughter." There has

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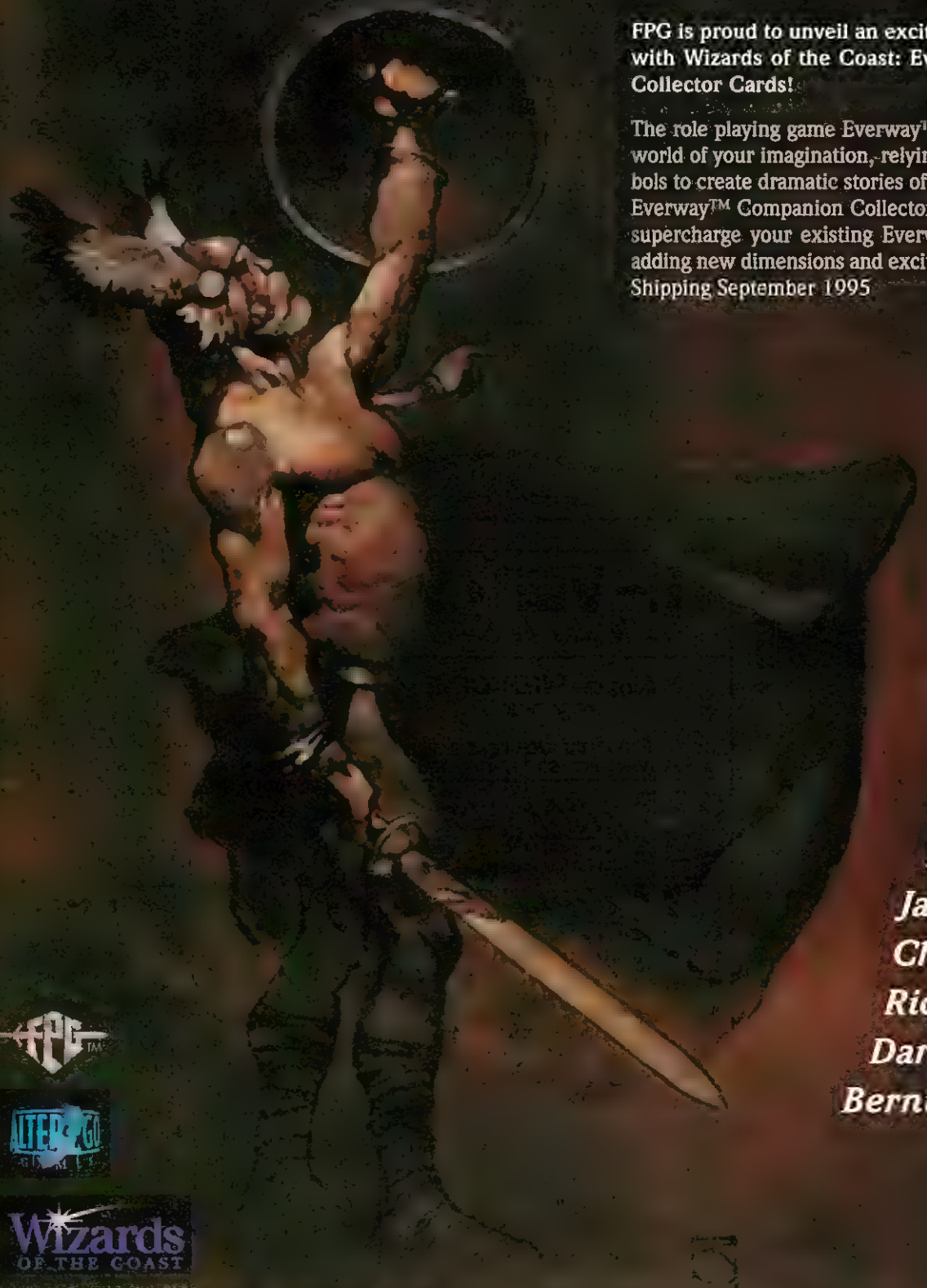

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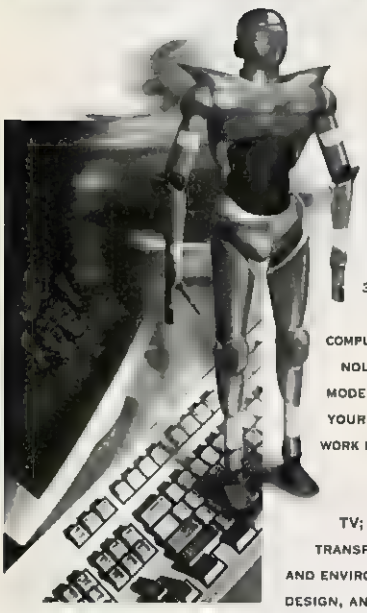

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An illustration from an early edition of Jules Verne's SF classic Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. *A new, more complete and more accurately translated edition has recently been published by the Naval Institute Press.*

never been a collection of his short fiction, although there are enough stories for at least two volumes.

7. JULES VERNE (1828-1905) may seem a poor choice for a neglected writer, but the facts are surprising. There is no reliable edition of Verne's sixty-five books in English. They have all been cut by one-quarter or more, rewritten, bowdlerized, censored, and poorly translated. Europeans know a vastly different Verne—a witty, elegant, scientifically accurate writer—than do English-speaking readers and are often taken aback by the low esteem in which Verne is held in America.

What was done to Verne in English amounts to literary assassination, a fact carefully documented by SF scholar Everett F. Bleiler and translator Walter James Miller. It has taken more than 123 years for a complete, unexpurgated, and superbly translated version of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1993, Naval Institute Press) to be published in English! Throw away your old editions, which are nearly worthless, and buy this new edition of a classic Verne novel, translated by Walter James Miller and Frederick Paul Walter.

8. R. A. LAFFERTY (1914-) has been almost completely abandoned by American publishing and, to some degree, by his fellow writers. He never received a Nebula and was awarded only one Hugo, a long time ago, which was given to him with some reluctance, it seemed to me, when I saw him accept it (he had to share it in a tie with two other authors). The excuses given by publishers for not supporting him are a confession of the increasing inability of publishers to sell books, or to lead the public rather than to follow it. The additional failure of Lafferty to be honored with a Grand Master Nebula Award prompts me to shout William Butler Yeats' judgment to his fellow Irish citizens when Sean O'Casey's

Continued on page 100

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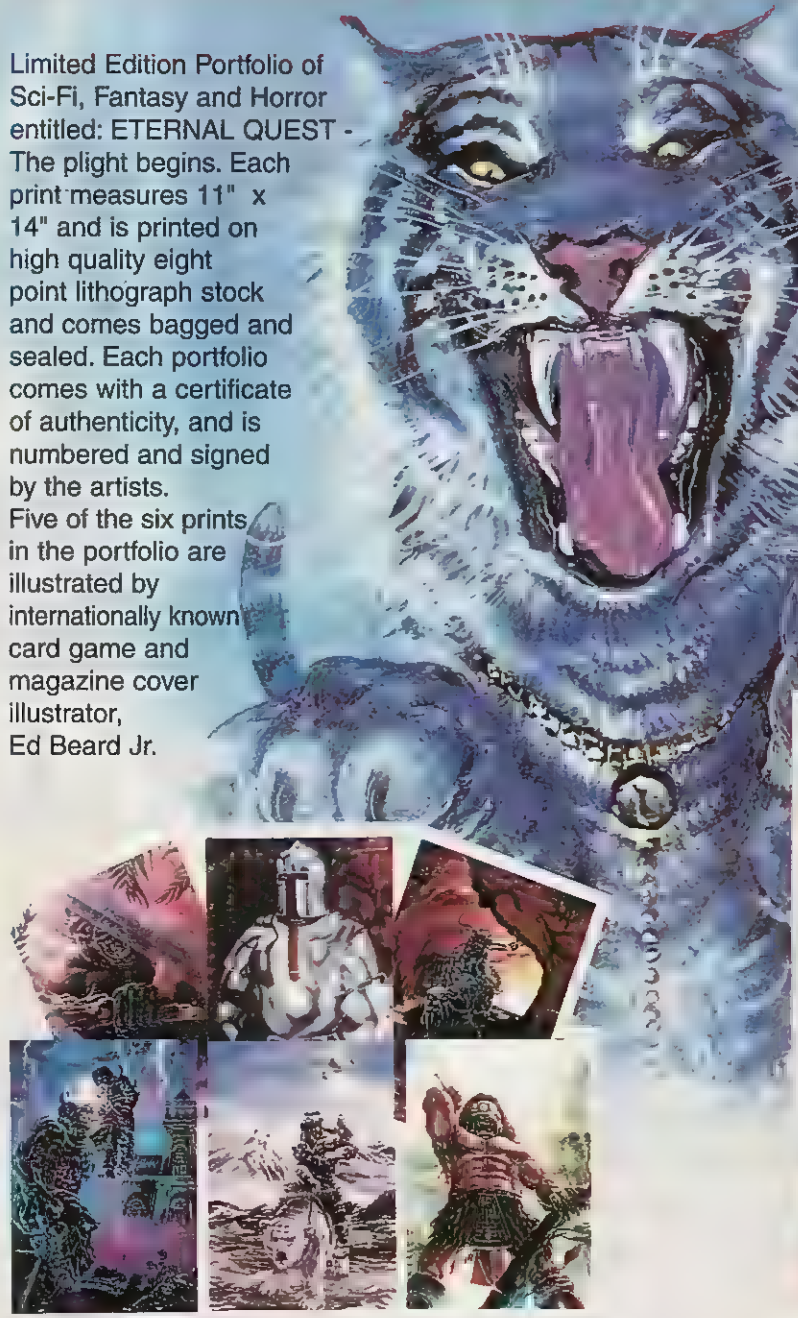

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SWEET BELLS JANGLED

BY MARTHA SOUKUP
Illustration by Greg Carter

Something terrible was trapped in Laurie's brain. Something she could not get out.

MY FRIEND CHUCK SAYS WE use up space in our brains for every song we've ever heard twice. Drive in your car scanning the radio for something that doesn't suck, scan button scan button scan button, and it's more computing power than they had for all the Apollo missions put together:

"—thing I do, I do it for—"
punch
"—West Virginia—"
punch
"—your cheatin'—"
punch
"—out what you mean to—"
punch
"—all live in a—"
punch
"—baby don't get hooked—"
oh god punch.

He said it the first time at a party, and we all laughed and went back to dancing to old songs we anticipated all the words to and finished our beer and went home. I didn't think about it much at first. Juggling a hundred things, same as everyone in this postmodern world, job and commute and friends and Ralph and family, and every little remark isn't going to stick.

He said it a second time when I was driving him to pick up his car at the shop. I turned on the radio, and he said, "Paula Abdul. 'Straight Up.' Now tell me, how many brain cells wasted to get *that* in two seconds flat?"

"You don't listen to Paula Abdul," I told Chuck, who favors male blues singers and women country stars, for no reason I can fathom.

"That's it exactly, Laurie!" he said cheerfully. "See, that only makes it worse. A shoe commercial and all that unavoidable radio and video exposure, and now I couldn't blast that song out of my brain with a firehose. Space in my brain I could be using to locate and destroy the sitcom gene."

"What?"

"The gene that drives people to create and watch sitcoms. I'd win the Nobel Prize if I developed a way to eliminate that sucker. Eugenics, hell, I don't care, it's worth the slippery ethical slope."

I laughed. Chuck has strong opinions.

"You don't like Paula Abdul either," he said, "but you knew what that song was by the time the speakers warmed up, which is, given modern technology, twelve-hundredths of a second. You see, you can't avoid it. Your brain is being invaded and taken over entirely by pop-music memes."

"Memes?" Traffic on the Bay Bridge was crawling as ever. I concentrated on keeping a car's length between us and the rust spots on the fender in front of us.

"I mean the little pieces of information that get passed from person to person like they have a life of their own. Memes. Like with genes, but not always as much fun as passing your genes on. Your brain, everyone's brain, is filling up with detailed, useless knowledge about popular music, to the eventual exclusion of everything else. If you graph all the curves and dot all the i's."

Chuck was being amusing as usual.

—At the same time.

At the same time, I was punching channels, through airwaves long since conquered by oldies stations, to find a song either one of us (both, for preference) could tolerate.

"—by your man—"

punch

"—precious moments—"

punch

"—on the end of lonely—"

punch

"—not me baby I'm too—"

I left it on that station. Chuck was still talking. You can wind him up and keep him going for hours. As Chrissie Hynde went on singing about her attitude, I was realizing I also had the most recent Pepsi jingle in my brain, and it had been there for a long time without my even paying attention. It had probably been idling in there for an hour, since I turned off the television, and it still was circling around. I was listening to the song on the radio, and I had the Pepsi jingle, and that Paula Abdul song that had started the whole conversation was in there too, no more to my taste than Chuck's.

I tried to concentrate on the road and my driving, and I'd already jettisoned any effort to concentrate on Chuck's jabbering. Three songs, four songs, five and six, as the radio turned to new ones, and the old ones wouldn't fade away. Trying to forget them just made me notice how present they were, one fragmented line or riff on top of another.

I fumbled one-handed in my purse for some aspirin. There wasn't any.

The only thing I knew for sure when I dropped Chuck off was that there was a Pearl Jam song on the radio. I could sing it to you. Well, half a verse or two. I don't know the song well enough to sing it, just to recognize it. Along with every other song I'd scanned on the radio that afternoon. Every single one. All the fragments of which seemed to be stuck in my head.

I stopped at a corner market and bought an overpriced bottle of aspirin. The store stereo was playing, I instantly recognized, a soupy reinstrumentation of "Pennsylvania 6-5000," and by the time the cashier handed me my change, it switched to an even soupier version of the Beatles' "Michelle," which had been pretty soupy to start out with. I took three tablets, but my headache was worse by the time I'd fought my way, radio turned off, back across the bridge. I got home, listened to the cassette on the answering machine play me Ralph's voice about plans for tomorrow instead of another old melody, buried my face in one pillow and put the other across my ears, and fell asleep after a while.

I REACHED around for the radio for a half-minute or so before I realized I wasn't hearing the whole song, just a few lines from the chorus over and over, in my head.

"MR. JONES" WAS PLAYING WHEN I WOKE UP. TALKING HEADS, NOT Counting Crows, and not Dylan singing about the guy who didn't know what was happening. I reached around for the radio for a half-minute or so before I realized I wasn't hearing the whole song, just a few lines from the chorus over and over, in my head. Now that I was awake enough to think of it, all three versions came to mind. Then that cotton commercial, with the lyrics from its alternate versions switching and jumbling together. I groaned and went to look for coffee.

The machine had another message on it. The phone's ring must not have penetrated the pillow. While the coffee brewed, steaming out head-clearing incense, I played it back.

"Laurie? It's Ralph. You in? OK, you must be in the shower. Don't forget my parents are coming in Friday. I can cook spaghetti or something, but be thinking about dessert. See you tonight, six at your office, OK? Dinner's my treat this time." I hit the rewind button. My headache from the night before lingered around the edges of my skull, so I headed for the bathroom, zapping the television on with the remote as I went by: a jolly man stood reciting a list of temperatures.

When I came back out, tongue curling from the taste of the aspirin, a jingle was burbling about the life-changing qualities of a candy bar. I zapped the television off again, but it was too late: the commercial had switched to a long-distance company ad that also had a theme song, which clashed badly with the candy bar jingle. Both of them mixed indiscriminately with better songs in my head. I knew both commercials by heart; everyone must; they were in heavy rotation lately.

The radio at the office was set, as usual, to a light-rock station, just audible. Normally I barely noticed it. I was sure I barely noticed it. It was hard to remember what was ordinary.

Today it was like barely noticing a toothache, but then the toothache gets worse and worse: my ears strained and I said to myself, yes, Phil Collins; yes, Mariah Carey; yes, Glenn Frey: I remember the sweater I was wearing when I saw that movie, I spilled cocoa on it last year and had to throw it out. Chik chik chik, like counters snapping over on some old-fashioned meter, like a stranger was sitting in my brain keeping score, flipping beads on a mental abacus.

When the same candy bar jingle came on, I nearly snapped my pencil lead. Reconciling shipping invoices wasn't an engaging enough task to keep the radio from driving me crazy. I went to talk to Debby, the receptionist.

"Boss Bob likes it on this station," she told me. "He says it's relaxing and comfortable and it makes all the thirty- and forty-somethings more productive."

"Maybe we'd be more productive if the music wasn't distracting us," I said.

She looked at me as though I'd said chocolate was good for your *health* but you wouldn't want to eat it every day. "This place gets boring enough as it is," she said decidedly. I went back to my desk and catalogued Bruce Hornsby, late Moody Blues, early Paul Simon, Lisa Stansfield, George Harrison, the local Chevrolet dealer's jingle, Neil Diamond, Boyz II Men, Annie Lennox, Whitney Houston—

At my three-thirty break I phoned Chuck at his bookshop. He left me on hold for five minutes and picked up again with a cheery "Hi-ho." Behind his voice, filtered by the phone connection, I could hear the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* album. Chuck plays his own CDs on his shop stereo.

"That thing you said, about songs filling up our brains," I said. "Is there—I don't know, can that be dangerous?" Chuck's store is tiny, a former candy shop with the shelves stacked two deep in places, but it has a section full of odd psychology and sociology texts, all of which he reads before he shelves them.

"How so?" Chuck said promptly. Most people would wonder why I was asking. Chuck just thinks every question is interesting.

Roberta Flack came on the office stereo.

I wasn't sure what I wanted to ask, or how to ask it without looking foolish, and five minutes on hold hadn't helped. "I don't know; it was interesting. I wondered if there were…any psychological conditions that could be traced to, you know, a kind of data overload."

"Like is anyone catatonic not because their genes programmed it or their parents were cold and distant, but because the old internal jukebox is clogged?" Chuck asked. "Cool theory, Laurie."

But not a pretty thought. "Well?"

"I've never heard of anything like that. Some schizophrenics hear music, but that'll work the other way around, dysfunction first, music second, right? I can't think offhand of any studies that suggest our brains can be topped off with raw data. It's not like a washing machine you overstuff and get suds all over the floor, you know?"

I made myself laugh. My head hurt. Chuck and his analogies. Probably he didn't know anything at all except how to sound like he knew what he was talking about. Still, he was the only one to ask.

"But if someone did get an overstuffed brain, what could he do about it?"

"Mm," he said. "Meditate. Clear that jelly out. Fill it with clear good karmic peace. Om money Padres, etc. Or you might prefer to meditate on the Giants."

But then I hadn't really expected any help. "Or the 49ers," I said. "Break's over, gotta go."

"Seeya," Chuck said. "Say, do you think you could drive me to the dentist's Saturday?"

"What happened to your car?"

"Broke again," he said breezily. "Didn't even make it to the bridge; they had to tow it back. Don't worry, I took the Bart train home."

I hadn't been worried. Chuck always manages. He managed to get me to agree to drive him to his dentist before I hung up.

RALPH WAS LATE. RALPH WAS ALWAYS LATE. I PACED UP AND DOWN THE lobby, the metal heel-savers on my pumps clicking unpleasantly on the tile floor to the beat of "Happy Loving Couples," a Joe Jackson song that had played on his car stereo on our second date. It was sort of our song. To have an "our song" these days you have to be ironic about it.

I forced myself to slow down. Now my heels clicked at ballad tempo. For several full seconds I had not a single song in my head; I'd slowed enough to throw Joe right out of gear. But "I Can't Make You Love Me" came in to fill the vacuum. The ghost of Raitt's rasping voice might have been pleasant if it had only been more than two lines of the chorus repeating over and over. So much music, and all of it in broken bits. My brain was a DJ scratching LPs, but a lame DJ. A white DJ from the suburbs who had moved to a city in which office managers played soft rock all day. A DJ fully capable of leaving the same few bars of a song playing monotonously all day.

A sadistic idiot WASP DJ.

"Honey, hi," said Ralph, and pecked me on the cheek.

I wanted to hit something; I reminded myself it wasn't Ralph I wanted to hit. I gave him a quick hug and tugged my purse up to my shoulder. He walked me through the revolving doors, whistling a Lionel Richie tune that put me right back into junior high school hell. Maybe I did want to hit him.

The restaurant was Italian and played snatches of Top 40 classical insistently, nothing that couldn't be recognized in a flash by anyone who'd ever tuned to PBS: Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Brahms, and nothing the slightest bit obscure by any of them. I ordered some food and ate and tried to chat. But I kept being distracted by the next three-minute chunk of Beethoven. That it was played softly only made me strain harder to figure out why I recognized it.

"Mom's decided to get a real-estate license," Ralph said.

"Oh?" I said. Wait, no, that was different: that was an extremely familiar melody by, who was that? Tchaikovsky. I thought.

"Into the last hole anyway, which he never birdies, so he couldn't stop talking about it."

I shook my head. It had been something about real estate.

Oh. He'd skipped tracks while Tchaikovsky was playing. I said something about how his mom could sell us one of those country-club houses right by a course someday if I became a convert. To show I'd been listening all along. Ralph laughed and it was Strauss playing this time.

The only thing good about it was that it had driven Richie out of my head. Richie came with a lot of ugly awkward memories of being thirteen at stupid school dances.

But when we left the restaurant, Ralph started whistling the song that went with that old video about the blind art student, and there went the flimsy bulwark of the Hayden violin bit that I'd been trying to keep a mental grip on, in preference to whatever else might invade my aching head.

"Laurie, are you OK?" he said, letting me go through the MUNI turnstyle ahead of him.

"Please don't whistle," I said.

"What?" His eyebrows are set a little wider than his eyes, giving him a constantly quizzical look. And an innocent one, but he was innocent. He was not trying to torture me. He wasn't.

I shook my head.

"I CAN'T THINK offhand of any studies that suggest our brains can be topped off with raw data. It's not like a washing machine you overstuff and get suds all over the floor, you know?"

"Is it a headache, honey?" he said.

"Sure. Yeah," I said. Matter of definition. If banal melodies have sharp elbows, they were surely bruising the insides of my skull with all the somersaulting around they were doing in there.

"Wait, I've got some aspirin," he said. He reached into the inner breast pocket of his jacket and held out one of those little rectangular tins at me. "They're the kind with the coating; you can swallow them dry."

So I took two aspirins, because I didn't want to tell Ralph anything as stupid as that I couldn't get a bunch of stupid snatches of stupid songs out of my stupid head.

The signs lit up for the J train. "Should I come with you tonight?" Ralph asked.

"Um."

This was blessedly not one of those nights.

The Indigo Girls were now playing in my head, another one of those crippled brain-songs with most of the chorus and only a line or so of verse. It was better than Lionel Richie, but it was still getting to me.

I threw my jacket on the living room chair. "Memes," I said. "Goddamn."

I was out of milk. I was out of juice. I was out of soda. *Let's go out to the lobby,* my brain sang, *to get ourselves a treat!* "Shut up," I said. I put my jacket back on.

When I returned from the store with orange juice, milk, and Coke—I was parched, maybe it was the aspirin or something—the cat dashed in ahead of me. "Great," I said. For no reason at all, Mister Rogers started singing that he liked me as I was. Not really, of course.

SO I TOOK TWO aspirins, because I didn't want to tell Ralph anything as stupid as that I couldn't get a bunch of stupid snatches of stupid songs out of my stupid head.

"Sure, I understand. Go home and lie down, honey. My parents get in at six tomorrow night. Maybe we can have lunch tomorrow to iron out the plans? Your place for dinner, right?"

"Call me," I said, and got on the J, leaving Ralph to wait for the train to his place.

SOMEBODY'S YELLOW-BROWN CAT WAS ROLLING AROUND UNDER THE bush by my building's front door. A song about dancing on ceilings was replaced with one about two cats in the yard. I tried to remember any tunes with at least a harder edge than either of those, as I let myself into the stairwell. I felt like I was drowning in syrup.

Now everything is easy, said the idiot radio in my head.

"Die, cat," I said, out loud, finally getting the key in its slot. My head did hurt, and Ralph's aspirins weren't helping. The cat kept rolling around. Fleas, or it liked the smell of earth and sap. Cats didn't know anything about music. I hated the cat.

My apartment was in the attic, three small rooms with sloping ceilings and a tiny, tubless bathroom. It was the first place I'd had all to myself in San Francisco. My friend Jen had told me when the old lady who used to live there had finally given up on climbing two steep flights of stairs every day and moved out, and I'd signed a lease before the landlady could place an ad. Jen lived in the second-floor flat. I remembered the song Jen and Harriet were playing on their cheap old console stereo after I looked at the little place above theirs and had signed the lease in the landlord's place below theirs. It was an Indigo Girls tune, and Harriet sang along with it as she poured me celebratory tea.

Also downstairs lived Jen and Harriet's roommate Duv, a small dark-eyed guy who liked rap and occasionally acted in what he called semi-professional theater. The first time I'd seen him, in a dusty tiny theater that used to be a storefront church, was in an "authentic" production of *Hamlet*, which meant that Gertrude and Ophelia were played by men in drag. With his gentle inward manner, Duv made an affecting Ophelia, though I never forgot it was him. It might have helped if there had been more than fifteen people in the audience. How sad he'd sounded whispering "O, what a noble mind is here o'er thrown," roughening Ophelia's voice with emotion for "Now see that noble and most sovereign reason, like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh...."

I think he was seeing the Hamlet on the side, because the night the show ended was one of the nights he came home and cranked his rap music so loud you could hear it in Berkeley. He always did that when something went wrong with his love life.

I stumbled up the stairs cursing at the cat. I'd left the upstairs door open, since I was just running to the corner, and the cat was sitting in my chair, scratching furiously.

"Now you've brought fleas in, you mangey little idiot," I said. The cat looked miserable. I sighed and scratched its ear. It pushed its head hard against my fingers and I realized why Mister Rogers was still crooning: we'd had an orange tabby when I was five or six. I used to pet it while watching television.

The world was just a minefield for memes. "Memes," I told the cat, which was purring and scratching at its other ear while still pushing against my hand. "Like fleas. If you see one, there are another two hundred you don't see, waiting to pounce and bite."

The cat pulled its head out from under my hand and chewed at its flank.

"You can't get them one at a time," I said. "There's always more." I forced Mister Rogers to stop. A sprightly Electric Company tune stepped right into his place, but all I could remember was the melody and "Immediate! L Y!"

Oh god.

Duv turned on his stereo below me. *Boom ba-doom ba-doom ba-doom boom boom!*, the familiar rhythm of his very favorite album, which would now play for three hours, four times through minimum—that and the Electric Company.

Absolutely not any more. I couldn't do this. I couldn't do this.

I shooed the cat out. He was too well-fed not to belong somewhere, to somebody who refused to spray enough for fleas like I'd have to now. I dragged back up the stairs, hauling my hands along the railing. It felt like I was drowning, trying to pull myself out of the water.

"Immediately," I said. "Memes. Poison them."

Ba-doom ba-doom. *Immediate L Y!* Om money Giants hum, I thought. Just nothing. Just nothing, please. Just detach from it all. Come on, please.

OK. If it was going to be that way.

I turned on the clock radio and found some "modern" rock that was six years old if it was a day. I remembered it playing when I moved to the city. I turned on television and found Whitney Houston. That movie she was in. I turned on the stereo in the living room and punched the button for the classical station. Italian food with Ralph.

"Om," I said. "Om."

Let the goddamn memes fight it out among themselves. Like calico cats. Eat each other the hell up.

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Burn themselves out.

It was a long, long night.

My head still hurt, but I'd given up on aspirin. I lay in bed while sounds pounded at me from four directions at once. North east west south. Point line space time. Spring summer fall winter. Earth air fire water. Memes and memes, everything connected to everything, maddening. I didn't want them, music reminding me of everything and everything reminding me of music.

The ceiling seemed to fall away from me. I sometimes had fevers as a little girl, the world gone distant and unfamiliar, strange, my mother singing a lullaby to soothe me to sleep, familiar old melody but strange in my sickbed, not soothing or upsetting but detached and alien; how it would feel like I was falling away from everything until I finally woke up, fever broken. And I fell, through my bed without going anywhere, past a place where none of the sounds were familiar anymore.

And I fell.

A lot of things were loud when I woke up. I turned the knob on the clock by my bed and it was quieter. There were more buttons to push in the living room.

My head felt hollow, or stuffed with cotton. There was a reason that was good. I'd remember it later.

There were things I had to do, I thought. The kitchen, that was the kitchen, coffee machine, fill it with water. *La la la la dah*, what was that? Nothing, gone.

The phone machine blinking, that was a thing to do, punch the button. Chuck's voice: "You in bed already? Laurie? Hello? OK, for the machine and for the record. Just in case you were still hung up on that music memes business. There really isn't anything to it, you know. The brain's probably supposed to work that way. Your brain makes all these connections, synapse to synapse. Associational. Like a hologram, not linear like a book or a record. If you pinned me down and made me swear in court, I'd guess that's how the brain actually works, by having patterns to associate with each other. Patterns of patterns, associations, you see, not little discrete bytes. Why babies should be raised in enriched environments with lots of different stimuli, except for maybe violent cartoons, except I never found anything wrong with those. Hey, maybe you could develop a computer that worked with melodies instead of in binary? Or cartoon imagery? This could make our fortunes yet. No, don't thank me. Well. Seeya."

The phone machine had gone on for a long time and now it stopped. Bubble sound in the kitchen, oh, it was water boiling, I hit the switch and it stopped too.

Bus pass train office. "Didn't you wear that yesterday?" said Debbie at the desk. I thought she might be right. Sounds were coming from behind and over her somewhere, a little box mounted on the wall. "If I could put time in a—" the box was saying. Something about camp, fishing, a phone call ("Grandma's dying, sweetheart, we're coming out to get—"), and then I couldn't make sense of the sounds at all, and what had I been thinking? Gone. Not important.

Debbie was looking at me. She'd said something, I was supposed to say something. "Hi," I said. I went to my desk.

The papers and numbers made sense for a long time. I bent over them. The phone rang. "Hi, hon," said a voice. It was Ralph. *Happy loving couples make it look*— One of those noises in my head just for a moment. Then it pulled away and fell away and was gone. "Listen, I can't break away for lunch at all today, I'll just bring my parents over when they get to the airport tonight, OK? I'll just do pasta and a salad, it'll be easy; there's no pressure with my folks, you know." Who was this? The phone kept talking like that but there was a sweet silence in my head. After a while the phone stopped talking, and I said, "OK," and it said, "OK, love you," and I hung up.

Nicer and emptier. Noises would happen in the air around me somehow and fall away, and everywhere they fell away from was so quiet and clean. The papers were making less sense but that was OK. Who would push around paper?

Something was ringing (*—pick up that telepho-o-o-ne?*—and it fell away and was gone), but after a while it stopped. I could hear myself breathe. There were sounds all around but they were like pebbles falling down a hill, random jangles. There was a reason that was good.

"Laurie, are you OK?" It was the girl who sat at that desk. I smiled. She looked nice. "Laurie, what's wrong?"

The chair was nice too; sitting was nice.

"Look, I called your friend Jennifer Hill. Her name was under 'contact in case of emergency' on your personnel files. She's going to be here soon, OK?"

I was hungry, though. A girl was talking to me about someone named Jennifer.

"Laurie!" A woman with short dark hair. I smiled at her too. "Wake up, Laurie, talk to us."

"Hello," I said (*Hello baaaaby!* what? gone nothing).

Then I was in the back of a big vehicle and it made a whooping noise in a rhythm like—like— There was a noise, and then a white room and white people in white clothes.

"Laurie, honey," said someone who wasn't wearing white. His eyebrows were wide and his eyes were wet. I didn't remember what you said when people's eyes were wet, so I smiled at him. Two other people stood behind him, holding his arms tight, wrinklier people. I smiled at them too. Lots of people came in after him, times that were different.

NICER AND EMPTIER. Noises would happen in the air around me somehow and fall away, and everywhere they fell away from was so quiet and clean.

A woman with short dark hair held hands tightly with a woman with curly light hair. "We worked out a deal with Mrs. Springer: she won't be renting out your place before spring; we're paying her enough to hold it. So you come home, OK? We don't need someone upstairs who plays disco all night or something, good neighbors are hard to find."

It was quiet for a while.

"Don't worry, I'll get to the dentist somehow," said someone in a funny, tight voice. "That's a joke. You get out of here, OK? Who am I going to talk to about all the stupid things everyone else gets tired of? One day we're shooting the shit, and the next day all the neurologists say they're stumped."

His eyes were wet. Had I seen something like that before? "Don't you try to go and be more interesting than me, Laurie, I have lots more interesting things to bore you with when you're better. You can't know too many interesting things. Sherlock Holmes wanted to forget everything he didn't have a use for to clear up space. Conan Doyle had him say that in a story, but people have a use for everything. Did I tell you we could make a fortune designing a computer that worked that way?"

Then he made a lot of funny noises in his throat, but they washed away in the burbly sounds from the box on the bedside table. □

SPONDULIX

BY PAUL DI FILIPPO

1. Beer Nuts

Money may be the root of all evil, but in the not too distant future, it will spark miracles.

THE SIGN READ HONEYMAN'S HEROES, AND FEATURED a cartoonish illustration of a Dagwood-style sandwich. Two slabs of painted pumpernickel separated by approximately six inches of various luncheon meats, cheeses, lettuce, pickles, tomatoes, sauerkraut, and hot peppers, dripping with mustard and mayo. The name of the artist was scrawled in the lower right corner: Suki Netsuke. In the lower left: ESTABLISHED 1978.

The sign hung above the door of a small shop on Washington Street, in Hoboken, New Jersey. The time was noon, on a vibrantly sunny Monday in June. The door to the shop was locked, a placard in the window turned to CLOSED. The placard was fingerprinted in ketchup.

Washington Street was busy with two-way auto traffic, with pedestrians and cyclists. Moderate-sized buildings lined each side of the broad avenue, businesses below, residences above. There was a faint odor from the river to the east lying atop the scents of exhaust and cooking. The Maxwell House plant, down where 12th Street met Hudson, diffused an omnipresent odor of roasting coffee, like a percolator of the gods. Spanish chatter, hiss of air brakes, thump of off-loaded cardboard boxes hitting the sidewalk, infant squalling, teenage brawling, sirens, music—the little city was noisily alive.

Down the sidewalk a block away from the sandwich shop a man walked absentmindedly along. He had a thick, ginger-colored beard, longish hair under a Mets cap. He wore sneakers, jeans, and a baseball shirt that bore the legend SPONSORED BY HONEYMAN'S HEROES on the back. He was trim, gracile rather than muscular. Twenty years ago, he had been certified a world-class diver. Good genes and a moderate appetite, rather than any strenuous regimen of exercise, had helped him keep his youthful build.

The man walked past a drycleaner's, a bookstore, a bar, a bodega, a botanica. His hands were in the pockets of his jeans, jingling a few coins; he whistled a shapeless tune.

When he arrived at the sandwich shop, he grasped the worn handle of the door without noticing the CLOSED sign, and attempted to enter. When the door did not immediately open, he seemed baffled. It took him a moment to decide there was no mistake on his part. He looked at the illustration of the gargantuan sandwich above the door. He studied the fingerprinted placard. Shading his eyes, he peered through the window at the darkened interior of the store. Had he possessed a driver's license, he would in all likelihood have removed it from his wallet and examined it, just to verify that he was indeed Rory Honeyman, and that this was his place of business.

Having made up his mind that the forlorn shop was, after all, his establishment, and that it was still locked up tight when it should have been opened for an hour, in anticipation of the lunchtime rush, Honeyman stepped back from the door and muttered two words:

"Goddamn Nerfball."

Then he pivoted and stalked away, with an angry determination.

Honeyman walked north on Washington until he came to 14th Street. The smell of coffee grew stronger, then weakened. At 14th, he turned east, toward the river. The neighborhood became dingier, poorer, unkempt. Abandoned buildings alternated with tough-looking lounges (LADIES WELCOME) and apartments sporting broken windows patched with cardboard and tape. Factories and warehouses began to predominate. A fish-processing plant exuded a maritime stench. A cat prowled hopefully outside the building. Honeyman thought he recognized Cardinal Ratzinger.

The crosstown street finally dead-ended at the Hudson. A rusty chain-link fence separated the street from a flat wasteland of weeds studded with abandoned tires, plastic bags, shopping carts, car hulks.... Across the sprawling river Manhattan reared in all its grimy glory.

At Honeyman's left hand stood a building. Before it, Honeyman paused, his former certainty of purpose momentarily faltering.

The problem: whether to enter the door before him or not. If he entered, he might possibly find his missing employee, and thus be able to open his store before he missed the entire lunch-hour trade. On the other hand, it was just as likely that he would encounter some bizarre event-in-progress that would draw him, whirlpool-like, into its centrifugal embrace, shanghai and waylay him with voices and flesh, drink and dope, schemes and plots, and completely waste his entire afternoon. Maybe even the whole day. A week. A month. A year. The rest of his life? Who knew? It had happened before, to others.... But wasn't he wasting his life now already? Hadn't he been for twenty years, since that single implosive day, under the Mexican sun, where his life had collapsed, impelled by his own impulsive actions, down to a singularity, infinitely dense, inescapable, poignant with the foreclosure of everything outside itself? Hush now, son, that's a question for 3 A.M., if ever, not a bright June afternoon....

So Honeyman contemplated the building before him a moment longer.

The structure was five stories tall, composed all of muted red brick, aged by over a century of weather. The uppermost courses of brick were embellished with decorative motifs, achieved by the ingenious stacking of master masons: herringbone, twill, crosshatching. Copper flashing, long-verdigrised, ran around the eaves, surprisingly unvandalized for a building deemed abandoned. The roof was of slate, in decent repair. The windows were all painted black. The building occupied an entire large city block.

At one corner of the building, closest to the river, reared an enormous square smokestack, capped at the top with more brick embellishment.

There was a door directly in front of Honeyman. In point of fact, there were three doors. The first was twelve feet high and ten across, actually a double door of two leaves. Made of thick planks once painted green, but now peeling to reveal bare splintery wood, the two halves of this door were secured with a chain and an enormous, rusting padlock that appeared at least fifty years old. Inset in this door was a more conventional-sized one, with an old-fashioned latch. It was this one Honeyman considered entering. At the foot of the person-sized door was the third, a pet door. (Honeyman might have employed this entrance, had he wished. Others often had.) This upper-hinged small entrance bore a legend in a lovely calligraphic hand which Honeyman recognized as that of Suki Netsuke. It read: THE CARDINAL.

The lintel of the largest door was a huge piece of Jersey limestone, mortared into the brick wall on either side. Carved into the soft stone was the legend:

1838—OLD VAULT BREWERY—1938

The later date was executed in stark Futura, the earlier in wasp-waisted Baskerville.

Honeyman, a few feet from the triple portal, listened. There was no noise from inside. This could be either a good or bad sign. It paid to remember that some of the most insane schemes of the Beer Nuts had been hatched in relative quiet. Thunder and lightning and apparitions on the Capitoline Hill did not attend the birth of every Caesar. On the other hand, everyone could be innocently sleeping. There was simply no way to tell.

Tossing caution to the coffee-scented winds, Honeyman stepped forward and opened the middle-sized door, which swung inward. He stuck his head and shoulders into the dark. "Yo, folks. It's me, Rory. Is anyone home? Earl? Hilario?"

There was no answer. Honeyman, his eyes sensitized to outdoor light-levels, could see nothing in the midnight interior. Sighing, he stepped fully inside and shut the door.

Vast hulking shapes loomed about him. Brew kettles, pipes, mash-vats—all the original equipment of the long-defunct brewery remained, covered by decades of dust.

Honeyman took a few tentative steps forward, hands outstretched. People moved around frequently here, changing their nesting locations according to complex social interactions. Honeyman hadn't visited the Beer Nuts in months, and had no idea in what spot Nerfball might be hibernating now.

Shuffling along in the musty dark, Honeyman cursed softly. All he wanted was to reclaim his employee and start making sandwiches. Instead, he was forced to play Blindman's Bluff. Growing angrier and more impatient, he unwisely picked up his pace.

Suddenly his foot caught the edge of something soft, body or mattress. Unprepared, he lost his balance and felt himself going down.

Honeyman landed heavily atop a lumpy something. A man grunted, a woman screamed. Make that "someone." Two someones.

Feeling that discretion required him to remain still, lest he unintentionally exacerbate the situation, Honeyman did not move. A match scratched on its gritty strip, a candle flared.

Honeyman discovered that he was lying crosswise atop Earl Erlkonig and Suki Netsuke, who were, in turn, reclining upon a stained, bare mattress. The situation would have been less embarrassing had the pair not been mostly unclothed, and had Netsuke not been Honeyman's ex-lover.

"Hi, Rory," said Netsuke coyly. Her half-Japanese features were as appealing to Honeyman as ever. Her skin was the color of pumpkin pie, her nipples the brown found at that pie's edges. Propped up on one elbow, she reached modestly for an article of clothing, found nothing to hand, and shrugged her nudity off.

"Hey, molecule," said Erlkonig, "nice of you to drop by." He extended a queerly colored hand, and Honeyman shook it.

Earl Erlkonig was a young Black man who also happened to be an albino. His hair was a thatch of short kinky platinum wires. His complexion was the color of weak tea attenuated by lots of cream. His eyes were a watery gray.

Netsuke squirmed devilishly beneath Honeyman, and Erlkonig said, "Uh, if you wouldn't mind...."

"Oh, yeah, sure. Sorry."

Honeyman pushed himself up into a kneeling position beside the mattress.

"Thanks," said Erlkonig. He discovered a pair of Jockey shorts and skinned them on, still lying down. Netsuke, meanwhile, had donned a T-shirt.

The light and noise had drawn a crowd. Honeyman looked up to

find himself the focus of a circle of curious faces: a majority of the permanent Beer Nuts.

Ped Xing, the only man in the world to profess both Orthodox Judaism and Zen monkhood. Long sidecurls contrasted rather sharply with his shaven pate.

Hilario Fumento, unpublished writer with a curious artistic philosophy, his pockets filled with the materials of his trade: call slips and pencil stubs filched from the public library.

Beatbox, a Hispanic fellow currently employed as a Balloon-o-Gram delivery man, and also currently wearing his work clothes: a complete clown suit and white-face.

Leather 'n' Studs, the inseparable lesbian couple.

Hy Rez, resident hacker and phone phreak, who provided the Beer Nuts with essential communication services.

Prominent among the missing was Nerfball, the one person Honeyman wanted to see.

"So," said Erikonig, who was as much of a leader as the Beer Nuts allowed, "what brings you here, my moll?"

"Nerfball was supposed to open up the store for me today, and he didn't. Do you know where he is?"

The Beer Nuts burst out laughing.

"I don't get it," admitted Honeyman, when the noise had died down. "What's so funny?"

Erikonig sought to explain. "Well, you know how Nerf believes in that dumb nasal irrigation of his. Snorting saltwater all day long to clear his sinuses, honking like a sick goose at all hours of the night. Well, this morning he goes to do it in the dark, only to find someone's spiked his water-bucket with Tabasco sauce."

"Ouch," sympathized Honeyman.

"So now he's off somewhere sulking. I suspect you can track him down by the sniffles."

Someone handed Honeyman a flashlight. "Thanks," he said, and stood.

"Bye, Rory," said Netsuke, and giggled.

Honeyman shook his head wearily. Life was always tossing your past up in your face.

Nerfball was huddled in a far corner of the brewery's upper floors. Honeyman could hear him talking to himself from some distance away, and, not wishing to intrude on his personal soliloquy, called out in warning.

"Hey, Nerf, it's me, Rory."

"What do you want?" whined Nerfball.

The flashlight beam revealed Nerfball sitting under an old oak desk. His pudgy form completely filled the capacious knee-well. His nose was inflamed. Incredibly lazy, Nerfball possessed one talent to an astonishing degree: he could make sandwiches better, faster, and more economically than anyone else Honeyman had ever seen. A sandwich crafted by Nerfball emerged from beneath his flashing knife as a thing of beauty, guaranteed to draw repeat customers. It was this salient skill that Honeyman now had to cajole him to employ.

Squatting to make eye contact with the victim of Tabasco poisoning, Honeyman said, "Come help me with the store, Nerf. I need you."

"Why should I? You never pay me anymore."

Nerf had Honeyman there. Cash flow had been pitiful lately. The rent had just been hiked a zillion percent, thanks to the gentrification of the city. (Honeyman himself was not a "B and B," as those "born and bred" in Hoboken called themselves. But he had been here so long, since Hoboken was just a joke, that his conscience was clear.) And a McDonalds had recently opened up in competition a few blocks away. Honeyman was barely scraping by.

Honeyman thought desperately. "Listen, I will pay you, I swear."

Nerfball sneered. "Yeah, I bet. With what? Funny money?"

Honeyman opened his mouth to deny the charge, then was struck by the futility of it all. Why should he lie to poor Nerfball? Chances were he'd soon go out of business, owing all his creditors immense sums. Why compound his guilt by promising more than he knew he could give?

Then, amidst his despair, in a blaze of inspiration he was to remember for the rest of his life, Honeyman had an idea.

"Yes, Nerf, I do intend to pay you in funny money."

This got Nerfball's attention. "Huh?"

Honeyman scrabbled in his pockets for paper and writing tool, coming up with an old unpaid electric bill and a lime-green crayon. He tucked the flashlight between chin and neck, and began to scribble on the back of the bill, reciting aloud what he was writing. "This paper redeemable for ten sandwiches at Honeyman's Heroes. Signed, Rory Honeyman." For good measure, he sketched a rough sandwich on it. The drawing ended up looking like that of a book with loose pages. He offered the paper to Nerfball, who took it suspiciously.

"Here, this will be one day's wages. It's worth about $40 retail."

"What good is this to me? You already give me free food."

Honeyman, still in the grip of his genius, rolled right over the pitiful objection. "Right, sure, but isn't everyone in this dump always starving? Make them pool their money—whatever you can convince them this is worth—and give it to you in exchange for the ten sandwiches, which you can make up and bring back here at the end of every day."

"Gee, I don't know—"

"People will love you for it."

"Oh, all right." Nerfball made tentative movements to emerge, and Honeyman stood up to give him room. Somehow the big man twisted around beneath the desk and began to back out. He said something that was muffled by his position.

"What's that?" asked Honeyman.

"I said, 'What's this coupon called?'"

Honeyman was stumped. "Does it have to have a name?"

Nerfball was standing now, brushing dust from his clothes. "Yes."

Honeyman reached deep down into some mythic well of American vernacular and came up with a word he would have earlier sworn he didn't know. "Spondulix. It's called a spondulix."

"Is that singular," quizzed Nerfball, "or plural?"

Without hesitation, Honeyman replied, "Both."

2. Days in the Pantechnicon

IN MEXICO CITY, IN THE MIDDLE OF 1968, THE SUMMER Olympics were taking place.

Sometimes when Honeyman said that sentence to himself, it sounded like a bit of incredibly ancient history. In the year 753 B.C., the city of Rome was founded. In the year 1066 A.D., the Norman invasion of England took place. A fact lost in the mists of time, relegated to musty textbooks, unseen by living eyes.

Other times, that period seemed as close as last night, separated from today only by a little interval of sleep.

For Honeyman had been there. And afterward his life had never gone as he had once innocently thought it would.

Prior to the start of these long-ago Games, Black protesters had succeeded in denying South Africa the right to participate. The head of the International Olympic Committee, one Avery Brundage, had led those who would have allowed South Africa to take part in the Games. This man was also in charge of handing out the medals.

When two American trackmen, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, won a gold and bronze respectively, they decided to stage a symbolic denunciation of Brundage's role. On the victory block, wearing African beads and black scarves, their shoes removed as a symbol of poverty, they raised gloved fists and bowed their heads.

They were immediately expelled from future events.

Sitting in the stands during this bit of typical sixties theater was an eighteen-year-old member of the U.S. swim team, a diver named Rory Honeyman. A nice Iowa boy, he had never even spoken to a Black person before coming to the Olympics. Now, all at once, in the same kind of mental burst that would later engender spondulix, Honeyman experienced an epiphany of radicalization. There is, like, injustice in the world. We are all brothers and sisters. I must protest.

Listening that night to the talk of the other Bloods in the Olympic dorms, Honeyman was confirmed in his initial decision. He said nothing to anyone, though, being of a retiring nature.

The next morning Honeyman felt filled with spiritual vigor. He went to his events. He won the silver. On the stand, he raised his ungloved fist in protest and bowed his head. The crowd seemed stunned. There was a silence as big as Mexico. Honeyman was the only White who had elected to register his solidarity with the Blacks.

Unfortunately, there were no television cameras present to broadcast his personal statement. (His hometown paper was the only one to print a photo, a blurred long-distance shot which made Honeyman look as if he were sniffing his own armpit.) Brundage, the media focus, was elsewhere, and at the same time three Black men named Lee Evans, Larry James, and Ron Freeman, were also protesting.

Honeyman's actions did not go entirely unnoticed, however.

When he returned home, a changed person, all the familiar sights of his childhood looking transmogrified, his draft notice was waiting for him. Nothing too unusual there—except that he had previously been granted a deferment.

(Eleven years later, talking in a Hoboken bar to a stranger who happened to be a retired Army colonel, Honeyman learned that those members of the '68 U.S. team who had belonged to ROTC had received phone calls warning them not to join the protest.)

Life in Canada was not that bad at first. Honeyman was a little sad, naturally, thinking of his vanished career in international diving competition. But, possessing a naturally cheerful disposition and being still young, he made the best of this strange twist of fate.

Life only became a bummer when his money ran out. His parents, feeling betrayed and disappointed by their son, refused to send him any more. Soon, Honeyman was desperate for a job.

That was when he met Leonard Lispenard.

Lispenard was the sole owner, chief roustabout, ringmaster, and occasional marriage counselor in Lispenard's Pantechnicon, a two-bit, vest-pocket circus-cum-carny that made a circuit of Canada's north in the summer months, and headed south in the autumn. Lispenard himself was a short fat man with bad skin, who, in his ringmaster garb, looked to Honeyman remarkably like the Penguin, Batman's arch-enemy.

It was June of 1969 in Calgary, and summer was already waning, when Honeyman approached Lispenard, reasoning that such an outfit would offer a lower profile job than most other concerns, an essential attraction for an illegal interloper in a country not his own. Inquiring for the owner, he was informed that Lispenard would not be available until that night's show was over. Honeyman purchased a ticket and resigned himself to waiting.

The tent was only half-full. Curiously, no one was sitting in the front rows. Honeyman went and took a seat right up against the ring, determined to get his money's worth.

During the finale of the show, when Honeyman was simultaneously growing impatient and feeling sleepy, he was galvanized by the sight of the first real love of his life, the performer with whom he would daily be associated for the next seven years.

The Baroness von Hammer-Purgstall.

There was a twenty-foot tower in the middle of the tent, with a large platform at top. No ladder ran up it; instead there was a kind of open elevator cage powered by a fitfully chugging engine. At the base of the tower was a big square collapsible container, metal-sided, plastic-lined. It had taken half an hour to fill it with water out of a firehose.

Lispenard waddled to the center of the ring. "Ladies and Gentlemen, without further ado or needless puffery, may I present, for your edification, the Baroness von Hammer-Purgstall—Canada's only diving equine!"

The Baroness was led out. A gleaming white Lipizzaner mare who had flunked out of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, she was the most beautiful horse the former farm-boy Honeyman had ever seen.

Lispenard had disappeared. A clown led the Baroness willingly into the elevator. She rode it calmly to the top. She trotted out onto the platform. She paused a moment. She jumped off.

It was like watching Pegasus. Honeyman couldn't breathe.

When she landed, the impact, as planned, flattened the tub, spraying water in a circle twenty feet out, drenching the first three rows of seats.

Honeyman didn't care. He vaulted into the ring, ran past the Baroness, and found Lispenard in among the trapeze girls and dog-trainers.

Buttonholing the owner, Honeyman declared, "Mister, I can ride that horse."

Lispenard replied, "Why, so can I, boy."

"No, no, you don't understand. I mean going down."

Honeyman explained a little about himself. Lispenard still appeared dubious.

"Listen, just give me a chance. Tomorrow night. C'mon. Please?"

"And what if you break your fool neck?"

"I'll sign a waiver. Anything. Just let me ride her."

Lispenard, sensing novelty, a circus's lifeblood, finally agreed.

The next night, Honeyman, attired in borrowed yellow tights, found himself standing beside the Baroness as the elevator made its grumbling ascent. He didn't even see the crowd or hear Lispenard's spiel. All he felt was the horse's shoulder muscles beneath his hand. All he smelled was her clean animal scent.

On the lofty platform, Honeyman boosted himself astride her. The horse never balked. She seemed to sense Honeyman's devotion and admiration. She waited till he was settled. Then she took off.

Honeyman contributed nothing. He was just along for the ride.

And what a hell of a ride it was. Honeyman had no sensation of falling. Instead, he felt he was going up, up, up, straight to the empyrean. In a splash and geyser, it was too soon over.

Honeyman was addicted. Lispenard was convinced. The deal was struck.

The next seven years were an uncomplicated, almost bucolic period for Honeyman. He slept late each day, rising for a communal lunch with the other performers. He groomed the Baroness, perhaps went to explore whatever town they were playing, ate a light supper. All day long the excitement would be building quietly but steadily inside him, until it reached its pitch just prior to the dive. Then he would feel drained, almost post-orgasmic, and the whole cycle would start again.

One day in November 1976, the trailer carrying the Baroness to winter pasture was broadsided on the highway by a truck. Honeyman was vomiting by the shoulder of the road when he heard the shot from the policeman's revolver.

Lispenard, genuinely sympathetic, kept Honeyman on for another year, as part of the tightrope act. Honeyman had picked up the skill in his spare time, accustomed to heights as he was and gifted with an infallible inner balance.

But Honeyman's heart wasn't in it. His life seemed empty without the nightly flight. Sometimes he swore he still felt the warm barrel shape of the horse's body between his legs.

When Jimmy Carter announced amnesty for draft dodgers in 1977,

Honeyman claimed his savings from Lispenard's squat old safe—more than once Honeyman had thought how that depository resembled its owner—and returned to the land of his birth. After an uncomfortable reunion with his parents, he headed east, ending up somehow in Hoboken, owner of an eponymous sandwich shop.

His life for the next decade was basically eventless. A smattering of love affairs, most recently with Netsuke, the demands of a small business, the pleasure of the spectator at sporting events. Nothing loomed large in his life; his psychic landscape was flat; his horizons untroubled by mirages, destinations real or unreal.

Until, that is, he invented spondulix.

3. Higher Economics

NERFBALL'S FINGERS MOVED LIKE A MAESTRO'S. Fluid, knowing, commanding, they flew through their arcane rituals. Cutting, slicing, chopping, dicing. Layering and spreading, halving and wrapping....

Filling drink orders, taking money and making change, Honeyman watched in admiration. Nerfball, his lank, longish, greasy hair whipping about, was a one-man sandwich factory. No, it was more like performance art. Sometimes, in fact, the crowd at the counter actually broke out in applause.

The inside of HONEYMAN'S HEROES was clean but not neat. Mounted on the exposed brick of the walls were numerous caricatures of various local characters, in the inimitable Netsuke style. She had also done the illustrated menu that listed the various sandwiches by name: the Shakespeare (ham and Danish Jarlsberg cheese); the Sinatra (tongue and baloney); the Pia Zadora (marshmallow fluff and honey). Bracketed to the side walls were scarred ashwood counters with stools positioned beneath. A pickle barrel—tongs hanging from the rim—occupied the center of the room.

Nerfball worked at a long, wide, butcher-block slab, at the front of which stood a narrow glass case functioning both as a divider between the artist and his fans, and as a display area for various figurines and good luck objects. A herd of plastic dinosaurs, a bust of Elvis, a ceramic horse that everyone knew meant something secret and special to Honeyman....

Behind Nerfball and on either side, within easy reach, were all his implements and raw ingredients. Bottles of Tiger Sauce, tubs of cream cheese, sharp knives and twin steamers that could turn a quarter-pound of pastrami and Swiss into so much ambrosia.

People yelled out their orders, Nerfball reacted with wordless speed, Honeyman made small talk, slices of pumpernickel, white, and rye arced through the air to land on the slab in perfect formation. What with all this, the afternoon sped swiftly by, another day among many, until finally it was nearing three o'clock, and the store was momentarily empty.

Nerfball wiped his hands on his apron and looked up with a dazed air. Honeyman walked over to him and clapped him with honest appreciation on the back.

"Thanks, Nerf. You were, as usual, superb. I think I can handle the supper crowd alone. Why don't you break early today? Here, I'll get your pay."

Honeyman took from the register the original and unique spondulix which he had hastily scribbled out a month or so ago, in a fit of desperate creativity. The old electric bill was now somewhat more greasy and worse for wear, but its green crayoned message was still discernible.

Honeyman got ready to go through the daily ritual that already seemed ancient. He would hand Nerfball the spondulix. Nerf would cobble up ten sandwiches for himself. Then his employee would hand the spondulix back and depart with the sandwiches, the medium in which it was redeemable.

Today, however, Nerfball refused to take part.

"Can't you pay me in cash?" he asked.

Honeyman was grieved. "Jeez, Nerf, you know every penny I take in goes for something crucial. I still haven't paid off the bakery for last week yet. If I have to meet your wages in real money, I'll go under. And then where will either of us be? You know I don't draw any pay for myself."

"Yeah, but you're the owner, Mister Capitalist. You're supposed to take risks and suffer."

"Nerf—I cannot pay you in American currency. Will you take spondulix or not?"

Nerfball sighed dramatically. "All right. Hand it over."

Honeyman surrendered the spondulix. Nerfball took off his apron and prepared to leave.

"Hey, wait a minute. Don't you want your sandwiches?"

"No, I don't. Beatbox got a new job, after some lady who didn't like the message he delivered squeezed his clown nose too hard. He works for a donut shop and gets to bring home all the stale ones. Nobody wants sandwiches anymore."

"All that sugar's bad for you."

"I can't help what people like."

"What're you gonna do with the spondulix then?" asked Honeyman. He felt somehow reluctant to let the piece of paper bearing his signature leave the shop.

"Oh," said Nerfball mysteriously, "I've got a plan."

And so saying, he left.

Honeyman did not sleep well that night. Dreams wherein brutal strangers accosted him, shouting, "Payable on demand!" troubled his slumbers.

The next day the same exchange was made. Honeyman inscribed this second spondulix on a napkin, secretly hoping that the perishable medium would quickly fall apart. The day after that the same thing happened. And the day after that, and the day after that.... Soon there were a rough dozen spondulix—representing 120 sandwiches—out in the world, God knew where. Nerfball refused to say. Honeyman hoped they were stashed somewhere in the Old Vault Brewery, where rats would chew them to pieces, lining their nests with Nerfball's nest egg.

But then, like sins or pigeons, the spondulix began to flock homeward.

Honeyman was alone in the shop around suppertime one day when Tiran Porter, the owner of a nearby hardware store, came in. Clutched in hand was a napkin. Honeyman's heart seized up, as if arrest was imminent.

"Hey, Rory, my man—is this thing any good? That Nerdo dude convinced me to take it in place of thirty dollars' worth of electrical equipment. I wasn't gonna, till I seen your name on it. I knew you'd play me straight."

Honeyman experienced a slight sense of relief, a momentary pass-

ing of his foreboding. At the same time, he suspected his relief was to be shortlived.

"Sure, Tiran, just like it says: 'good for ten sandwiches,' 'bout forty bucks. You made a good deal."

Porter seemed mollified. "OK, then, I'm gonna spend some of it."

"Some of it?"

"Sure, I can't eat no ten sandwiches at once. Give me an Atlantic City on white, hold the lettuce."

As Honeyman made the sandwich, his mind worked frantically. How was he to redeem part of a spondulix?

When the sandwich was made, Honeyman did the only thing he could. Feeling like God on the second day, he created a new denomination. On a fresh napkin, he scrawled: ONE SPONDULIX REDEEMABLE FOR NINE SANDWICHES, then signed it. Taking the ten-sandwich note, he handed Porter the sandwich and his change.

"I don't get no cash back?"

"Sorry, Tiran, but you paid in spondulix. It's sorta like food stamps."

Nodding with new understanding, Porter departed, apparently satisfied.

One sandwich down, 119 to go.

But of course Nerfball would be getting paid again tomorrow, thereby causing the minting of a new ten-spot spondulix, which would no doubt enter circulation soon, more than negating the single sandwich he had redeemed just now.

Honeyman tried to figure out if he was going to come out ahead or behind on all this. A pain began to mount behind his eyeballs, and he suspected that his brainstorm was going to lead to his complete undoing.

One day soon he would think back to this moment and realize his pessimistic forecast had been all right. And all wrong.

The next day Honeyman verged several times on confronting Nerfball about his wanton and promiscuous exchange of spondulix for goods and services other than the specified sandwiches. But each time he stopped himself. The bills were really not Honeyman's any longer, once he passed them over to Nerf. The pudgy Beer Nut had every right to use them as best he could. Honeyman was lucky he could get the man to employ his talents at all. The various members of the Beer Nuts were notoriously lazy, avoiding work whenever possible. And Honeyman needed Nerfball more than Nerf need him. Lacking this one crucial employee, the shop would go under. God, what a precarious existence this world afforded! And what a mess Honeyman had made of his own personal life, ever since that day under the Mexican sun, before the eyes of the world.

Watching the sweaty Nerfball transform heaps of cold cuts into works of art, Honeyman resigned himself once again, both to his past and to whatever was to come.

No customer tried to tender spondulix in payment that day. But the following afternoon a group of workers from the Stahl Soap Corporation came in at shift's end, smelling sweetly of their product, like a newly opened box of bath salts. At first Honeyman couldn't figure out why they had traveled all the way over from Park Street, down by the river, since it was quite a distance away. Then they revealed they had two spondulix among them, and wanted all twenty sandwiches.

While he was slapping the sandwiches together, with none of Nerf's finesse, Honeyman tried to find out where they had gotten the spondulix. He couldn't figure out what Nerfball had traded for since he seldom bathed, there being no running water at the brewery where the Beer Nuts squatted.

"So, guys—where'd you get my coupons?"

A skinny fellow who seemed capable of consuming an infinite amount of "free" pickles spoke up around a mouthful. "Harry Lieberman—you know Harry, he drives the company truck—well, Harry hauled a bunch of stuff somewhere for those hippies that live in the old brewery, and they paid him with these. Harry gave 'em to me as payment for his bowling league dues. So I'm sharing them with the whole league."

Honeyman nearly sliced the tip of his finger off. This was bad news indeed. The exchanges were getting more complicated. The spondulix were now circulating among third parties, people who, for some unknown reason, obviously trusted in them enough not to try to redeem them immediately. And others, fourth-parties, also seemed willing to accept the spondulix without firsthand knowledge of Honeyman's honesty or willingness to make good on them. Wasn't this property a known characteristic of real money? Didn't economists have some complicated way to measure this circulation, the number of times money changed hands?

God, this was scary! Honeyman's personal signature on dozens of napkins which were roaming abroad in the city of Hoboken like prodigal children, masquerading as money. He had to abandon spondulix! But he couldn't. His business would go under if he did.

Piling slices of tomatoes atop rings of Bermuda onions in a stack as tall as his worries, Honeyman wondered where this would all end.

And in the back of his mind was another worry. What were the Beer Nuts up to? First electrical equipment, then hauling—it had to be something dangerous.

When Earl Erlkonig walked into the shop during a lull the next day with Suki Netsuke on his arm, Honeyman knew, just from the expression on the man's hereditarily blanched face, that his trepidations had a foundation in reality.

"Hey, Rory, my molecule, I'm paying a call to invite you to an Outlaw Party."

So. Here it was, out in the open now. And it was just as bad as Honeyman had feared. Anxiety gave way momentarily to annoyance, as from the back room came the distracting honking of Nerfball, performing his hourly nasal irrigations.

The Outlaw Party was an institution of long-standing. Sans permit or permission, the Beer Nuts and other assorted fringe folks would take over a public location come nightfall of a specified day. Decorations would be strung up, kegs tapped, food laid on, and music unleashed. Invitation to the Party was initially by word of mouth among a select group, although as soon as its noisy existence became generally known, it would be besieged by the hoi polloi.

The Hoboken police generally tolerated the occasional Outlaw Party, knowing that the motivation was sheer fun, not vandalism or riot. However, the rush of events sometimes went too far, and overstepped boundaries in a way the authorities could not ignore. Always implicit in the festivities was the possibility of chaos and anarchy breaking loose. There was the time, for instance, when the site had been the abandoned ferry building down near the PATH station, before that structure's recent renovation and the re-establishment of ferry service to Manhattan. Apparently the sight of a full orchestra atop the building's roof, with dancers threatening to fall off the gables and kill themselves, had been too much for the cops to stand. The subsequent dispersal of the revelers had eventually involved two fire companies and a contingent of National Guardsmen.

Honeyman supposed he was just getting older, but for some reason he didn't relish the idea of an Outlaw Party as much as he once had. The prospect of confronting the police at this time, when he was already guilty of perpetuating spondulix, rather took the enjoyment out of things.

Regarding Erlkonig's open face, with its broad white African nose and translucent eyebrows, Honeyman sought to detect any duplicity in the man's invitation, but failed. Netsuke, meanwhile, has silently taken a napkin from the counter and was folding it into an origami crane. Honeyman tried to work up a little resentment at Erlkonig for stealing his girl away, but couldn't do it.

"Oh, what the hell," he finally said. "Sure, I'll come."

"Great, my moll. I knew we could count on you. And maybe you'd contribute a little something—?"

"No problem. I'll make up a few platters."

"It wasn't sandwiches I was after, Rory. The food angle is pretty well covered. But there's a few other things we need to purchase, and our treasury is, like, empty."

"Earl, you know I'm broke."

Erlkonig smiled broadly. "Ah, my moll, that's where you're wrong. All you have to do is write out a few more of those spondulix things you've been giving Nerfball."

In a flash it dawned on Honeyman. Nerf never would have had the

initiative or brains to promote spondulix. It must have been all Erlkonig's doings. The man was crafty. Honeyman had always credited him with brains and guile, but this was beyond belief. To take advantage of Honeyman's quandary in such a duplicitous manner—"Earl, you're asking me to mortgage my future. Every spondulix I write is like a loan against my potential profits, meager as they might be."

Erlkonig became serious. "No, man, that's wrong. That's like a worst-case scenario. All the spondulix will never come in. Most are just gonna circulate forever. Take my word for it, I know. It's money for nothing, Rory. It's like having a money tree growing in your yard. You just have to overcome your fear and go with it."

Honeyman wanted to believe. It would make things so easy. "Do you really think so?"

"My moll—I know so!"

At that moment, Netsuke finished her paper bird. She opened her hands and tossed it upward, like a magician releasing a dove. The origami crane clearly flapped its wings a few times, then glided to a landing on the counter in front of Honeyman, where it promptly melted back to the original napkin, now intricately creased.

Netsuke said nothing. The two men looked at her, then back at each other.

"I wish I knew how she does that," said Erlkonig.

"Me too," said Honeyman. Then: "Oh, Christ, here's your spondulix." Using the magic napkin, he wrote one spondulix for the largest denomination yet: five hundred sandwiches.

"Thanks, moll," said Erlkonig, putting the draft away in his shirt-pocket. He and Netsuke turned to go.

"Hey, where's the party?"

"Oh, we're commandeering the campus of the Stevens Institute. Week from tonight. See you there."

Then they were gone, leaving Honeyman shaking his head at the audacity of it. The Stevens Institute of Technology occupied a spectacular bluff above the river, and afforded a gorgeous view of nighttime Manhattan. It was bound to be a hell of a bash.

And when the delivery man from the bakery came that day, Honeyman had no trouble persuading him to take spondulix in payment.

4. Overlooking Sinatra

A FRISBEE SKIMMED LOW OVER HONEYMAN'S METS cap, nearly knocking the hat from his head. Out of the concentrated dusk beneath a big elm off to his left came the voice of Leather.

"Sorry, Rory!"

From his right, a paraphrastic echo from Studs: "Yeah, sorry, Honeyman."

"That's OK, girls," replied Honeyman, immediately bending low and executing some broken-field running to avoid the expected barrage of pebbles and verbal abuse, which indeed quickly materialized.

"You jerk!"

"Don't call us that!"

Attaining the shelter of a doorway, Honeyman straightened up. He dug his fingers thoughtfully into his rufous beard. Now why had he gone and annoyed Leather 'n' Studs like that? He normally went out of his way to be nice to them, harboring no ill will toward anyone of any sexual stripe whatsoever. But here he was starting the night off by deliberately—sorta deliberately, anyway—insulting people. He supposed it stemmed from his own unhappiness, as the bad attitudes of most folks did.

During the past week, Honeyman had created and spent spondulix with a wild abandon bordering on inebriation. Erlkonig's devil-may-care attitude had infected him—Honeyman had allowed it to infect him—and he had dived blindly into the deep-end of the algae-topped pool of monetary irresponsibility. As a result, all his debts had been extinguished. The local merchants reacted at first with doubt and caution, but in the end agreed to accept this novel kind of payment, in lieu of anything better. With the U.S. currency thus saved, Honeyman paid off those institutions such as the regional electric company which would never, he was sure, recognize spondulix.

And, as Erlkonig had maintained, fewer spondulix returned than went out, thereby creating a positive cash flow. Honeyman had no idea where the missing spondulix were. Perhaps they had all gone through a wash cycle or two, forgotten in pants pockets, and been rendered into fibrous lumps. He fervently hoped so.

The lifting of his fiscal obligations should have lightened Honeyman's spirits. He should have been feeling on top of the world right now. Instead, he was plunged into an ever-deepening gloom.

Despite his actions at the Olympics two decades ago, Honeyman had never considered himself a rebel. All he had ever wanted was a little niche in society, a moderate income, a few of the simpler pleasures. True, he had once dreamed of exhibiting his diving skills for the admiration and pleasure of the public—either solo or horsed—but even that modest ambition had been twice by fate denied. All he wanted now was a quiet, contemplative existence.

Instead, though, he found himself flouting the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and God knew what else, all by creating and putting into circulation a kind of mock currency in direct competition with the almighty United States dollar. He was hard-pressed to put a name to his crime—he knew it wasn't counterfeiting—but he was certain it was a crime, and a heinous one at that. You might spit in the eye of the U.S. Olympic Team and expect nothing more deadly than a draft notice as response. But to steal money, in effect, out of Uncle Sam's Treasury, to set yourself up as some kind of sovereign on a par with the government—Honeyman couldn't imagine what kind of punishment would be deemed draconian enough by an incensed bureaucracy.

Looking out over the verdant, path-slashed campus, which was filling up with the throngs anticipating an evening of Outlaw revelry, Honeyman sighed deeply. A couple walked by, hand in hand. Honeyman was too wounded even to sigh.

What about someone to share his hoped-for simple existence with? Was that asking too much? He had thought Netsuke was the one. Had thought she felt the same. Then she had thrown him over for Erlkonig. Perhaps the age difference had been too great. And now he would have to confront her tonight, as she hung all moony-eyed over Erlkonig.

Mustn't become bitter. Get a grip on yourself, Honeyman! Look on the bright side—a single man, relatively good-looking, under forty, resident in a metropolitan area where such specimens were at a premium—the feminine world should be your oyster. (But what did that cliché mean, anyway? Oysters were tough to pry open, and you could rip your hands to shreds on them.) As long as the cops weren't battering down his door, he'd try to maintain his usual optimism.

Honeyman stepped forth from the shadowy doorway, resolved to have a great time tonight.

He tripped over someone who had come to sit unnoticed on the single step before him. Both Honeyman and the unknown figure went tumbling to the turf.

Recovering, Honeyman confronted Hilario Fumento, writer with a peculiar mission.

Fumento had become fixated early on in his career by a certain frisson provided by the best fiction: the encounter in print of a commonplace mundane item, experience, or sensory datum which was instantly recognizable but also previously unrendered in print. The famous shock of recognition, in fact. It was Fumento's dream to construct a novel made entirely out of these gems. He was still in the process of collecting them, leaving the arrangement into a narrative, however bizarre, until later. Lacking money for materials, Fumento pilfered call-slips and pencil stubs from public libraries, and used these to record his epiphanies.

Fumento, digging a scrap of paper out of his pocket now (Honeyman had a brief fear that it would turn out to be a spondulix ready for redemption), said, "Hey, Rory, what do you think of this one: 'Washcloth hanging over a shower curtain rod: its lower, wetter edge is darker.'"

"Beautiful, Hilario. It's got an almost haiku-like quality."

Fumento smiled bashfully and stuffed the paper back into his jacket. "Gee, thanks, Rory. It just came to me this morning, while I was washing up. We've got water at the Brewery now, you now."

Honeyman's curiosity was piqued. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. Earl swung it. He's got big plans for fixing the whole place up."

It flashed on Honeyman how Erlkonig intended to pay for these dream renovations, and he grew angry. He must confront the albino before he went any further. "Well, we'll see how far he gets. Listen, I'll catch you later, Hilario."

"Bye, Rory. Have a good time."

Honeyman got to his feet and moved off.

Attracted by a scattering of airy multicolored spangles, he found himself at a broad, flagstoned pavilion at the western edge of the campus. Here, the trees had been bedecked with strings of fairy lights. A bandstand had been erected, and a crew of volunteers were arraying speakers and other equipment atop it, under the direction of Hy-Rez, the Beer Nuts' technical expert, and his assistant, Special Effects.

Special Effects' given name was Saint Francis Xavier, commonly abbreviated S.F.X.. His father was a defrocked Jesuit. Special had long red hair down to his shoulders, and a dopey broad face. These looks, however, belied a quick wit.

"Hey, Special. Seen Earl around?"

Walking backward, laying cable from a coil, Special replied, "He was overseeing the fireworks last time I spotted him."

Fireworks. Did the man's temerity have no end? This night would see them all in jail for sure. Honeyman debated leaving the party before it had begun, then decided against it. He was in no mood to mope in his apartment alone. And he had to confront Erlkonig about his cavalier spending of spondulix.

Honeyman spotted the refreshment table, and decided he could use a drink. Nodding in that direction, he asked Special Effects, "Can I get you anything?"

"No thanks. Hy and I are permanently wired now."

Honeyman smiled, certain that Special was joking. The man stopped playing out wire and lifted a strand of hair. In the dim light, Honeyman thought he detected something behind his ear. Special Effects resumed his work. Honeyman shrugged and moved away. Chances were Special was having him off, but he didn't care to inquire further.

From an aluminum keg, Honeyman drew a big plastic cup of beer, sipped. Belhaven Scottish Ale, imported from Glasgow. This must have cost a fortune. He would wring Erlkonig's neck.

The crowd was thickening now, as full night descended and the party began to really take off. The lines were several deep at the several kegs. Someone stuck a box of donuts under Honeyman's nose.

Beatbox. "Have one, Rory. I made them myself."

Honeyman took a donut, bit. "Taco flavored?"

"It was only an experiment. But the owner—he ain't no experimentin' man."

Honeyman was sorry Beatbox had lost his job, but in a way was also selfishly glad. Perhaps now, he faintly hoped, Nerfball would have to return to taking sandwiches in trade.

Munching his taco donut, more out of habit than desire, Honeyman idly watched a drug deal being consumated in the shadows. The seller proffered a ziploc; the buyer handed over...a napkin?

No, impossible, things were too far out of control...

Sounds of tuning up wafted over from the musicians assembled onstage. "Who's playing tonight?"

"The Millionaires."

"Don't know 'em."

"They're just a pickup band. Local guys. Some from the Broadcasters, though."

The opening to Pink Floyd's "Money" rang out: sampled cash-register noises. The singer came in: "Money, it's a drag..."

Honeyman downed his beer. Beatbox had left to circulate with his Mexicanized crullers. Honeyman threw the remainder of his surreptitiously down underfoot. Courtesy only extended so far. Drawing another cup of dark ale, he went in search of Erlkonig.

The pavilion was filling up with dancers. Honeyman traveled along its balustraded perimeter, as alert as anyone who had just polished off eighteen ounces of Glaswegian beer could be for a glimpse of Erlkonig. But the man was nowhere in sight. Netsuke neither.

Beyond the stone rampart the land fell vertically away, straight down some fifty feet to Sinatra Drive. Just beyond the busy highway lapped the Hudson. Across its width loomed the fabulous gemmed cliffs of Manhattan, remote as the mirage of some Arabian seraglio.

A woman Honeyman did not recognize was leaning on her forearms on the stone railing, looking out toward the distant city. A thick mane of brown hair tumbled over her shoulders. She wore a halter top. Her bare coltish legs were displayed attractively by a short skirt. She was shod with leather sandals.

Moved by a powerful attraction, Honeyman fell into the same pose beside her. The band was playing an old fifties tune, once covered by the J. Geils Band: "First I Look at the Purse." There was an odor of coffee in the air.

Honeyman was tongue-tied, an unusual occurrence. The woman did not look at him. He wetted his dry throat with a sip of beer. Said at last, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

The woman turned toward him. Her face was not young, but it was beautiful. Honeyman was surprised to see she was roughly his own age. She wore prescription glasses with a cord hanging down from the stems like reins.

"Oh, I guess so. But I don't know anyone here. I just moved to Hoboken from Chelsea. My building went condo."

The woman's lack of connection to the Beer Nuts or anyone in their crowd only increased her attractiveness to Honeyman. "My name's Rory."

"Addie."

They shook hands. Hers was slim and warm. Honeyman felt his own to be a big sweaty paw.

"That's an unusual name," said Honeyman.

"I was just going to say the same thing about yours. Mine's short for Atalanta. Atalanta Swinburne."

"Mine's not short for anything."

She went back to gazing at the river. Honeyman could think of nothing else to say. Desperate, he blurted out: "Honeyman."

"Please?"

"My last name's Honeyman."

"Do you own—"

"The sandwich shop on Washington? Yup, that's me."

"I've been meaning to try you."

Honeyman gulped. "Oh, please, come on in...."

"I will."

Honeyman timed the silence at thirty seconds. It seemed much longer.

"The water looks so cold," she said finally. "And a breeze is com-

ing up. Do you mind if we move?"

Honeyman's heart raced. She had said "we." The pronoun had never sounded so seductive.

They moved off among the dancers. Trying to stay together, Honeyman dared to grip her upper arm. She didn't complain.

Back on the grassy area, Honeyman spotted Erlkonig.

"Wait here just a second, please. I gotta talk to that guy."

"All right."

Honeyman hailed the albino. "Hey, Earl!"

Erlkonig, either alarmed by Honeyman's attitude, or having something to hide, began inexplicably to run.

Honeyman set off in pursuit.

He trapped Erlkonig near the fireworks.

"Earl, be cool. What's the matter? I just wanna talk."

Panting, Erlkonig said, "I can't discuss anything with you when you've been drinking. You're too liable to get mad."

"Why should I get mad? What've you done? It's nothing to do with spondulix, is it? Tell me!"

"Later, moll, later."

Erlkonig looked about for an avenue of escape. He began to clamber among the fireworks arrayed on the ground in their tubes, upsetting the jury-rigged arrangements. Honeyman strode implacably after him.

Erlkonig looked backward over his shoulder, tripped, and sprawled across the control panel.

Everything went off at once.

Honeyman felt he knew what he had missed in 'Nam.

Rockets zipped by parallel to the ground. Fireballs burst against the sides of buildings. Great crimson and lemon-yellow starbursts broke at treetop level. Fiery chrysanthemums flowered, only to shatter the next moment against the sides of parked cars, their lifespans briefer than mayflies.

There were screams, explosions, wild feedback as the Millionaires, unfazed, improvised to the unexpected lightshow. Sirens began to sound, distant, growing nearer.

Honeyman dove to the ground and began crawling.

Fireworks continued to roar by overhead.

A few feet away, he encountered Addie, who had followed him.

"Let's get out of here!" he shouted above the noise.

She nodded mutely. They wormed their way out of the path of the seemingly inexhaustible fireworks, stood up and began to trot away. At the edge of the campus they were nearly run over by a screaming patrol car. They ran then, laughing, and didn't stop till they fell into Honeyman's bed

5. Off To War

AMID THE NOISES OF HAMMERING AND SAWING NEXT door to the sandwich shop, and of Nerfball performing his hourly nasal irrigation in the employee's restroom, Honeyman stood transfixed. In his hand he held one of the new spondulix.

The material of the crisp bill was good linen bond. It was printed in tones of mustard-yellow. On its front was a rendering of a giant hoagie sandwich. On its obverse was a portrait of Honeyman, complete down to his Mets cap. Under the hoagie was the legend: IN PUMPERNICKEL WE TRUST.

This bill was denominated "FIFTY SPONDULIX." There were others—mayo-white, ketchup-red, pickle-green—in various lesser and greater denominations, lying in Honeyman's till. And with every passing minute, more spilled out of the presses set up in the basement of the Old Vault Brewery. Each one, in Honeyman's eyes, a little ticking timebomb bound to explode one day right in his very own hairy face.

It was this new wrinkle in the evolution of spondulix that had caused Erlkonig to react so nervously two weeks ago to Honeyman's attempted approach. The Black albino, exhibiting the initiative and ingenuity which had led him to his position of preeminence among the Beer Nuts, had taken it upon himself to professionalize the production of spondulix. Having come to rely on them to further his manifold schemes, Erlkonig felt he could no longer make do with scribbled napkins, which were likely to disintegrate with constant handling, or, even worse, to be mistakenly used for some ignoble purpose such as blowing one's nose. Moreover, the napkins were bulky and hard to carry in one's wallet.

All these arguments and more had Erlkonig adduced to Honeyman shortly after the disastrous conclusion to the Outlaw Party, as he tried to convince him of the necessity of this step. Honeyman had not been easily swayed.

"C'mon, Rory, loosen up. What're you worrying about anyway? There's nothing illegal in what we're doing. Just look at these things as coupons, like. Yeah, manufacturer's coupons, that's all they are. When Kellogs gives you thirty-five cents off on Raisin Bran, are they trying to subvert the government, like you claim we are? And what about when the supermarket doubles the coupon? They're adding some incremental value to that piece of paper—which, by the way, even says on the back in fine print, 'Redeemable for one-tenth of a cent.'"

Honeyman shook his head in weary dissent. He knew in his bones that all this was wrong, and that they were going to have to pay the piper one day, but he just couldn't summon up the logic to counter Erlkonig's snaky persuasiveness.

"Look," Erlkonig continued, "even if these things are money, so what? Don't look so shocked, I mean it. So what? You gotta get some historical perspective on this, my moll. You know, the government wasn't always the only one who minted money in this country. Right up to the mid-1800's, private banks used to issue notes that were supposedly backed up by their deposits, and which circulated as legal tender. And lots of times a bank printed so much that the collective value of the paper was two or three times the bank's holdings. Of course, the whole system eventually went bust, causing quite a shitstorm, but that doesn't apply to us, since we're going to keep tighter reins on things."

The phrase "went bust" made Honeyman's vision waver. "Earl, I just don't feel right about—"

Erlkonig brooked no naysayers. "And during the Depression, all across the country individual stores issued scrip redeemable only at their establishments. Same thing we're doing. And the Confederacy—don't forget about them. What was the first thing they did? Right, issue their own money."

"They were seceding from the Union, Earl. We're not doing that, are we?"

"No, of course not. But you must admit that these are uncertain times, Rory. A few years ago we went through the worst depression since the thirties. The homeless, the unemployed, the people whose jobs went to Asia—this government is fiscally messed up. If we can help people by printing spondulix, why shouldn't we?"

Honeyman found it hard to speak out against such a liberal cause. "But how is one little sandwich shop supposed to

float so many notes?"

"Well, remember what I said before. Not all of them are going to come back at once. But you are right in thinking that your present operation isn't set up to handle such volume. That's why I've got to talk to you about these plans for expansion I've got here—"

At that moment Honeyman was jolted from his reverie by several demands on his attention. The customer whose spondulix, tendered in payment, had set Honeyman drifting now said, "Hey, can I get my change?" At the same time a workman stuck his head through the raw, unframed passage in the wall that led to the adjacent storefront and asked, "Rory, which wall did you want the counter on?" And an argument broke out between Beatbox and another customer.

"What's that you're putting on my peanut butter? I asked for orange marmalade, not horseradish."

"Hey, man, you got to try something new in your life now and then. Experiment, like."

"I don't want an experiment, I want a good sandwich."

"This is gonna be el supremo, man. Just give it a shot."

"There is no way I am going to bite into that—"

Hurriedly making change (forty-one spondulix), and shouting out, "North wall," to the carpenter, Honeyman intervened on the customer's behalf and convinced Beatbox to assemble the sandwich as instructed.

Nerfball emerged from his ablutions then, and Honeyman put him back to making sandwiches, transferring Beatbox to the register, where his passion for culinary recombinations would get little play.

"Hello, Rory," said a woman. Her voice, though known only for a fortnight, bore for Honeyman all the deep familiarity and intimate thrill of the voice of one's lifetime mate, heard under a hundred circumstances over several decades.

Turning from the register, Honeyman saw Addie standing among the crowd of hungry customers, patient, radiant, gorgeous.

Hastily doffing his apron, Honeyman ducked under the hinged portion of the counter and came to stand beside her. He grabbed her in a bear hug, picked her up off the floor, spun her around in a circle, set her down and kissed her with appropriate enthusiasm. There was heartfelt applause, catcalls, and whistles from the assembled diners. Addie blushed.

"Boy, am I glad to see you," said Honeyman.

"So I gathered. I've got the afternoon off, and wondered if you could get away."

"You bet. Hey, Nerf, you're in charge."

Honeyman took Addie's hand, and marveled how good it felt.

Meeting Atalanta Swinburne had been the best thing that had happened to him in a long time. She was so stable, so centered, such a calming presence in his life. The perfect antidote to the whirlwind of madness that spondulix and the Beer Nuts had brought into being around him. It seemed almost too much that she should also be witty, beautiful, and good. Coming off his breakup with Netsuke, Honeyman had needed someone just like Addie. And here she was, somehow inexplicably attracted to him, with apparently equal intensity.

Sometimes life could be very good.

"How's the addition coming?" asked Addie.

"Let's take a look," said Honeyman, and detoured next door.

The shop next to Honeyman's Heroes had been a boutique that had tried to attract an upscale clientele and failed. They had gone under six months ago, and the place had remained vacant since. Honeyman had had little trouble convincing the owner of the building to let him break through the wall and connect the two stores.

The place was a cacophony of power tools, and smelled of fresh-cut pine boards. The laborers—all paid with spondulix, of course—were putting in a second food preparation area and more dining space, all in anticipation of the increased business the circulation of more spondulix would bring.

Honeyman inspected a few details, trying to act like a competent businessman, and then gratefully escaped with Addie out into the glorious July day.

Addie worked for some government agency or another—Honeyman had never quite managed to elicit the details from her—and seemed frequently to have her afternoons free, which time she seemed to enjoy spending with Honeyman.

"I thought we might go into the city," she said now, "for a little shopping. I want to go to Canal Street Jeans."

"Sounds good to me. But I've got to change first. I smell like pastrami."

Addie bit his ear. "I like pastrami."

It took Honeyman two hours to get dressed.

It was such a beautiful day that they couldn't stand the thought of plunging underground on the PATH line to Manhattan, so they decided to take the ferry. It was comparatively slow, but that was hardly a consideration today, when they were out to loaf and amble.

The ferry terminal—a heroic old building dating from 1907—stood on the water at the south end of town. For many years it had been abandoned and decrepit, slowly falling to ruin. Then the city had revived the ferry service and restored the building to its old splendor. Now boats shuttled daily between Hoboken and Battery Park City.

Addie and Honeyman stood inside the terminal, in line with the other passengers waiting for a boat to dock. Honeyman thought he saw some of the Beer Nuts in the crowd. Curiously, they all seemed to be decked out in white coveralls and wearing goggles pushed up on their heads. Honeyman dismissed all thought of them from his mind.

The ferry nosed into its berth, its rear half projecting out of the building. A ramp rattled down on its chains, people disembarked, and the east-bound passengers filed on.

Yes, he was certain of it now. Those were several of the Beer Nuts. And they seemed to be carrying holstered sidearms, right out in the open— Goddamn it all, what was going on—?

Addie led the way upstairs to the open observation deck, and they moved to lounge at the railing. The ferry blew its horn and got underway. Once out on the river, under the cloudless July sky, enthralling breezes brought them scents of the city and the distant sea. Honeyman put his arm around Addie's waist, and tried to forget all his troubles.

Someone bumped into him. It was Ped Xing, the Orthodox Jewish Zen Master. He wore tinted goggles. He had been slinking along, bent at the waist, frequently swiveling as if expecting attackers to emerge from every bulkhead.

In one hand he carried a large plastic gun.

"Xing, what the hell—"

"Quiet, moll, this is war. It's every man and woman for himself. Herself. Whatever."

The shaven-headed Ped Xing made as if to prowl on, but Honeyman restrained him with a hand on his tensed shoulder.

"Xing—just hold it right there. War with whom? And what kind of gun is that?"

"Well, not war, really—just war games. We're all playing Survival. Earl said it'd be good for us, sharpen our senses and reflexes for anything that comes our way. These are splat guns. They shoot those paint pellets—you know. Oh, that reminds me." Ped Xing unzipped his coverall down to the waist, revealing a scrawny and hairless chest, and took out a second gun that had been tucked into the elasticized top of his Jockey shorts. "As an honorary Beer Nut, you're a legitimate target. I'm doing you a big favor, warning you this way. I could've scored a lot of points off you. Anyway, you'd better take this."

Honeyman accepted the spare pistol automatically, even as he was saying, "Xing, this is crazy, I won't get involved." He was suddenly overcome by a strange kind of feeling, something weirder than déjà vu, and he realized that he was being forced to decide once more about organized violence, a choice he thought he had made twenty years ago—when he slit open the envelope bearing the government's "Greetings." Was once never enough…?

Ignoring Honeyman's protestations, Ped Xing was already duck-walking away. He called back enigmatically over his shoulder, "Satori comes whether you want it or not."

At that moment a shrill cry of victory paired with a wail of defeat emerged from belowdecks. There was the sound of pounding feet, and several people burst out of a hatchway onto the upper level: Leather 'n' Studs pursuing a hapless Hilario Fumento, liberally bespattered with technicolor bulls eyes. Blinded by panic, Fumento headed straight for Honeyman. The writer looked as if he intended to vault the rail and plunge into the river. Leather dropped into a crouch, bracing

her arm to squeeze off another shot. The ferry rocked in a swell just as she pulled the trigger and the shot went awry, striking Addie right on the chest. A bloom of blue paint blossomed on her left breast.

The world went red and hazy in Honeyman's eyes. He let out a wordless roar that transfixed all the Beer Nuts.

"Hey, moll," began Leather, "I'm really sorr—"

It was too late for temporizing. Honeyman emptied his gun at the frozen woman, spotting her white suit from neck to ankle. Fumento had stopped beside his protector, and Honeyman now wrenched the gun from his hand and turned toward Studs.

"Yikes," she whimpered, and turned tail. Honeyman potted her backside once or twice, then took off in pursuit.

The rest of the twenty-minute trip passed in a mad blur of running, hiding, and sharpshooting. From bilge to fo'c's'le the game ran its course. Honeyman lost track of how often he reloaded. Someone had slipped him a pack of refills. In mid-voyage, the Manhattan-bound ferry passed the Hoboken-bound vessel, also carrying a load of Beer Nuts. The two teams lined up on their respective port sides and exchanged a fusillade that left both boats looking like an artist's dropcloth.

"You couldn't hit the broadside of a bus!"

"Avast! Drop your sails and heave to, Matey!"

"Surrender Dorothy!"

As the boats pulled away from each other, there was a final chorus of raspberries and Bronx cheers.

Everyone's ammunition ran out just as the ferry pulled into Battery Park City. The players assembled to count coup. Honeyman—though not devoid of hits himself—was declared the winner by unanimous acclamation.

Rejoining Addie, Honeyman felt rather sheepish. After his initial anger had worn off, he had found himself really enjoying the game. Was this any way for a former sixties pacifist to be feeling? He felt as guilty as a vegetarian caught with a roast-beef sandwich halfway to his lips.

"Gee, Addie," he began, "I'm sorry this had to happen..."

"Don't apologize. I'm glad I matter that much to you." Lifting her glasses, she wiped a tear from one eye, and Honeyman wondered why.

"Hey, are we gonna be able to go shopping looking like this?"

"Oh, it's just Soho. We'll fit right in."

They walked uptown to Canal Street, and then east, arriving finally at Canal Street Jeans. While Honeyman browsed, Addie tried on clothes, eventually settling on a few items. At the register, Honeyman said, "Here, let me get this, to make up for my crazy friends." He opened his wallet, and, without thinking about what he was doing, drew out and offered a fresh 100 spondulix note. They took it.

6. Bretton Woods

EARL ERLKONIG, MINISTER OF FINANCE (WITHOUT PORTFOLIO), called the meeting to order. He had to speak loudly, above the noise of construction in the Brewery. Dozens of hirelings from Mazuma Construction Company were reconstructing the headquarters of the Beer Nuts into luxurious apartments and common rooms, gyms and saunas, a kind of adult clubhouse. The building had been bought from the city for a minimal payment of back taxes—made in spondulix. Erlkonig had specified that all the old vats and kettles were to be retained, patched and polished, as a reminder of their humble origins, and this requirement was necessitating extra costs that preyed constantly on Honeyman's mind.

Erlkonig, Honeyman, and several others sat around a table in one corner of the main floor, isolated by temporary walls from the hullabaloo. It seemed strange to see the interior of the brewery by electric light. The altered environment here seemed emblematic to Honeyman of vaster, more troubling changes, changes that had caused him many sleepless nights, and which promised many more.

It was the beginning of August, a mere two months since Honeyman had invented spondulix. It might as well have been two years, though, considering all that had happened.

Erlkonig held Cardinal Ratzinger, the Beer Nuts mascot, in his lap. The tiger-colored cat looked extremely well-fed. He wore a collar set with stones which Honeyman prayed were only cubic zirconia.

Now Erlkonig set the Cardinal on the table and stood. He moved with military precision to a map of the tri-state region hanging from a wall. Removing a collapsible pointer from his shirt-pocket, Erlkonig began to lecture.

"You can see from the shaded areas—which we are updating daily, by the way—that the penetration of spondulix is outracing our highest expectations. The pattern seems to be swift initial infection of an urban area, followed by slower dissemination into the surrounding countryside. Once Hoboken was permeated, Manhattan and the other boroughs were a given. But I think you'll be surprised by what followed next.

"To the northeast, in Bridgeport, New Haven, and Hartford, there are already some quarter-of-a-million spondulix in circulation. We expect to move up the coast, through Providence and into Boston, at the rate of ten miles a day.

"In New York state, Albany, Syracuse, and Utica are thoroughly ours. Buffalo represents our farthest western penetration to date, and opens a gateway to Canada.

"In our home state, Camden is almost as thoroughly saturated as Hoboken, and is providing a beachhead into Philly, after which Pittsburgh is expected to fall easily. Moreover, I just received a report today informing me that the casinos in Atlantic City are accepting spondulix for all wagers. They're even talking about our expansion into some kind of coinage which would be acceptable to their slots."

Honeyman held his head in his hands and moaned. He had avoided all previous sessions of these strategic councils, figuring that when he was called on to testify on his own behalf in federal court he could claim ignorance of what was being done in his name. (How that would superficially square with his portrait and signature being featured on an endless stream of spondulix, he had not yet figured out.) Today, however, Erlkonig had convinced him to attend, promising him that there would be some news that would gladden him.

So far, he hadn't heard it.

Hilario Fumento raised a hand, seeking the floor, and Erlkonig gave him the nod.

"What are the demographics of our supporters?" asked the writer.

Erlkonig tried to look thoughtful, as if summoning up the data from deep recesses, but Honeyman could see he had instant access to all the facts about spondulix, and was merely pausing for effect. Erlkonig was clearly a man who had found his destined calling, and was relishing every nuance of his new Machiavellian position. He looked positively diabolical.

"We're strongest, of course, among the fringe elements of society, those involved in what is commonly called 'the underground economy,' whether dealing with

legal or illegal goods and services. However, since almost every citizen comes into contact with this segment of society at one time or another, we are establishing a stronghold upon the average consumer as well. When Joe Sixpack's boss offers him payment in a currency unknown to the IRS, and when Joe is certain he'll be able to redeem that currency for things he wants and needs—well, there's no reason for him not to take it, is there?

"This brings us," continued Erlkonig, "to the topic of further expansion." Erlkonig collapsed the pointer with a flourish and leaned on his forearms on the table to directly confront the rest of the cabinet. Disregarding his high status, the Cardinal licked the man's flat nose. Erlkonig pushed the cat away.

"This country is too big to conquer by slow radiation from a central source. I am therefore proposing, my molecules, that we seed the rest of the nation with volunteers whose mission will be to establish spondulix as an accepted medium of exchange. From these scattered sites, just like colonies of mold in a Petri dish, spondulix will spread in all directions, until it eventually forms a complete network."

Honeyman opened his mouth to object to this insane scheme, but Erlkonig interrupted.

"This plan is contingent on one other step. I need to backtrack a little first, though—with your indulgence.

"As I predicted when we initially began mass production of spondulix, the redemption rate in sandwiches has been a tiny fraction of all usage. A doubling in the shop's size, the hiring of additional help and the promotion of Nerfball to supervisor, along with extended hours of operation, has been sufficient to handle the increased trade—even counting phone orders from as far as sixty miles away.

"Obviously, though, we cannot continue to accommodate ultimate redemption in sandwiches once we go nationwide. At least not without setting up branches of Honeyman's Heroes in every major market. And the extra work attendant on such a program would unacceptably hold up our plans. Besides, having these notes tied to a little Jersey sandwich shop gives the enterprise too much of a strictly regional feeling."

It began to dawn on Honeyman then what Erlkonig was working up to, and the albino's next words confirmed it.

"Molecules—I am proposing that we go off the sandwich standard. Just as the U.S. dollar is no longer backed by gold, so I move for the official decoupling of spondulix and any comestibles."

Honeyman jumped to his feet. "No, I won't stand for it! As long as these stupid pieces of paper were good for something, we had a loophole in the eyes of the law. If we take that away, then they become nothing but...but money."

Erlkonig looked at Honeyman with an annoying pity. "Rory, man—they already are. May I see a show of hands now? All in favor?"

Every hand but Honeyman's shot up. No one wanted to put in any more time in the sandwich shop.

"The motion is carried then," declared Erlkonig with obvious pleasure.

"What's this mean for me, then?" asked Honeyman. "Am I supposed to just close the shop down?"

"No, not if you don't want to. Of course, you could shut it up for good and just live off spondulix, like the rest of us. But I'll understand if you want to keep it going, as a hobby like. All I want is that you don't take spondulix for sandwiches anymore."

"Wait just a minute. I'm supposed to be the one business in Hoboken now that won't accept spondulix? Me, the guy who invented them?"

"I know it's kind of illogical, but it has to be. It's a symbol."

Honeyman was trying to puzzle out the Wonderland logic of all this when an origami frog hopped into the room. The Cardinal, spotting it, leaped down and batted at the paper creature, whereupon it promptly unfolded into a 500 spondulix note.

Suki Netsuke stuck her head in the doorway.

"Meeting adjourned," declared Erlkonig.

After everyone else had filed out, Honeyman was left standing alone with Erlkonig and Netsuke. The Black man, abandoning the formal style of speech he had conducted the meeting in, hung an arm around Honeyman's dejected shoulder and said, "Cheer up, moll, you've done your part. You can retire now, and take it easy."

"I don't want to retire. I want..." But Honeyman was forced to stop speaking. He didn't know quite what he wanted. Once he had wished for a little more money. And look where that had gotten him.

Addie. He wanted Addie. That was the one sure thing in his life. He'd go see her now. She'd know what to do.

"Bye, Rory," called out Netsuke cheerfully as Honeyman left the Brewery.

Over the past two months, since they had met at the ill-fated Outlaw Party, Addie and Honeyman had spent much time together. Honeyman had happily shared with her his past, checkered as it was with disappointments and failures: his Iowa boyhood; his Olympic protest; his flight from induction; his long tenure with Lispenard's Pantechnicon and his deep affection for the Baroness von Hammer-Purgstall (although Honeyman, even in the throes of sexual passion, could not bring himself to mention how much Addie's hair reminded him of the Baroness's mane); his repatriation; his ten-year slumber at the sandwich shop, enlivened only by the antics of the Beer Nuts. Of all this and more had Honeyman gratefully disburdened himself to the patient ears of Addie.

She, in turn, had told him—what? A little of her life in Manhattan, some few odd incidents from work, her taste in books and music, the bad points of a couple of ex-lovers. It didn't amount to much, compared to Honeyman's complete disclosure.

But in the end it didn't matter. Honeyman had fallen completely in love with Atalanta Swinburne. He didn't demand all the intimate details of her past; she'd tell him when she was ready. It was enough simply that she chose to be with him now. He had reached a point where he couldn't imagine life without her.

How happy he would be at this moment...if not for spondulix. Honeyman clenched his fists as he walked hotly to Addie's apartment. He had to put a stop to the spread of this alternate currency. But how? It was a juggernaut, a machine out of control, a runaway fiscal train on a track greased by greed. Too many people besides himself were involved now. The monster born of his desperate brain had been adopted by hundreds of foster parents. Could he even call it his own invention anymore? Did he have any right to intervene in something that affected the welfare of thousands?

He hoped Addie would have some answers, because he sure didn't.

At her building, Honeyman buzzed. There was no answer. He sat on the stoop and waited.

An hour later, around four o'clock, he saw Addie approaching. Spotting him, she quickened her pace. Honeyman's heart lifted.

"What's wrong, Rory?" she asked after a quick embrace.

Honeyman explained. Addie made sort of a modified Scout's salute, laying the backs of two fingers across her lips in a habitual gesture betokening thoughtfulness. She spoke: "The first thing we both need is supper and a drink. Then we can sort things out."

Buoyed by Addie's practicality, Honeyman felt instantly better. God, what would he do without her?

They went to the Clam Broth House on Newark Street, where they ordered Fisherman's Platters and big plastic steins of beer. In a booth, under the gazes of autographed portraits of local celebrities, they discussed spondulix.

Addie knew everything about spondulix, had lived through all phases of the phenomenon save for their creation. Yet somehow she had remained aloof from the new money. She never spent it, and in fact refused all offers of spondulix from Honeyman—although she didn't object too strenuously when he paid for their joint treats with them. He supposed her finickyness was a manifestation of her independence, and nothing more. Neither did she choose to hang out with the Beer Nuts, unless Honeyman was with her. In any case, her detachment from the communal madness of spondulix made her advice all the more valuable in Honeyman's eyes.

When Honeyman had finished bringing her up to date, he said, "I've got to get out of this whole business. I'll tell Earl to put his picture on the bills and withdraw all the old ones with mine. Then I'll be free."

"No, I don't think Earl will agree. It would look like a coup d'état, and that would shake people's confidence in spondulix. He can't risk altering the known equation that already works so well. He still needs you, if only as a figurehead. You've got to stay involved, as a voice of moderation."

"You really think so?"

"Yes, I do. If you hope to change anything, you've got to maintain your contacts and work from within. You can't let the Beer Nuts run things all by themselves."

Honeyman doubted how much of a difference he could actually make. Perhaps he was looking at the situation with blinders, though. Addie seemed adamant about his remaining involved; he decided on the spot that he would follow her advice. "OK, I'll stick with them for a while yet. But this can't go on much longer."

"Oh, I agree."

Honeyman pushed at some unidentifiable bits of batter-coated substance on his plate. "You know, it's just tradition that makes anyone eat here. The food never gets any worse, but it never gets any better either. What do you say we go dancing?"

"Now you're talking."

They went hand in hand to Maxwell's on Washington Street, where a zydeco band was playing. Addie slipped her glasses into her purse, and they danced till the sweat was rolling off them. A steady infusion of New Amsterdam beer insured against total dehydration. When the club closed at two in the morning, Addie and Honeyman were almost too drunk and tired to walk. They staggered laughingly down Washington Street until they came to Elk Lodge No. 74, with its life-sized golden statue of an elk positioned on a pedestal outside. Honeyman was trying to show Addie how he had ridden the Baroness when the cops came. Honeyman dug his heels into the golden elk to spur it to greater speed. He went nowhere fast. The cops dragged him off while Addie rolled on the sidewalk clutching her sides.

"Straighten up, Buddy, you're coming with us down to the station."

"Hold on a minute, Charlie. It's that guy on the money."

"Mister Honeyman? Listen, you shouldn't be cutting up like this so late. You're gonna get in trouble. Lemme show you home."

Late the next morning Honeyman arrived at the sandwich shop with a tremendous headache. The busyness of the place depressed him. Why did there have to be such things as commerce and money anyway? Couldn't we all live naked in the forest and eat nuts and berries?

Honeyman instructed Nerfball to tell his crew about the new policy: no spondulix accepted. A sign was lettered and hung proclaiming same. Honeyman waited eagerly for business to drop off. Perhaps a wave of panic would spread through the community, causing people to abandon spondulix as quickly as they had embraced it.

No such luck. People shrugged off the change as an eccentricity of Honeyman's, and paid for their sandwiches in U.S. cash. If this place wouldn't accept spondulix, there were hundreds of others that would.

Discouraged, Honeyman left the shop around three. He went to find Erlkonig, intending to admit defeat. He left Nerfball behind to conduct a class in Sandwich Construction Methodology.

"Pay attention now, guys and gals. Hold the slice of bread squarely in your palm and spread the condiment of choice toward you, not away..."

Erlkonig was on the roof of the brewery, supervising workers who were constructing a kind of crows nest high atop the tall smokestack that rose from one corner of the Brewery.

"How do you like it?" he asked Honeyman. "We've put a spiral stairway inside the chimney. It's going to be my executive penthouse."

Honeyman was too discouraged to rebuke Erlkonig for his delusions of grandeur. He related what had happened.

Erlkonig clapped Honeyman heartily on the back, nearly causing him to lose his footing on the slippery slates of the roof. "Great, moll, I told you it would all work out for the best. There's great things ahead for us, I can feel it in my bones."

An unseasonably cold wind blew in off the river, making them both shiver.

"So can I," said Honeyman.

7. Taking the Big Dive

A LATE SEPTEMBER BREEZE BROUGHT THE AROMA OF roasting coffee to Honeyman's nose as he stood before the door to the Old Vault Brewery, wondering whether to enter. Suddenly, he was gripped by an enormous and melancholy sense of déjà vu. Had he not stood thus a mere four months ago, when his life was relatively simple and uncomplicated, that day he had come looking for Nerfball? And had he not experienced a premonition of all the grief and travails that would come his way, should he enter? If only he had heeded this inner voice. Too late, though. He was in this mess up to his neck, with no apparent escape. All the regrets in the world wouldn't suffice to extricate him now. And there was no point in hesitating outside here any longer.

At that moment he felt something butt up against his shins. He looked down.

It was the head of Beatbox, emerging from the pet door.

"Oh, sorry, man," said Beatbox. "That's OK," replied Honeyman, stepping aside to let the fellow crawl completely out. Contrary to expectations, Beatbox did not immediately stand up.

"What's happening?" asked Honeyman.

"The Cardinal has been missing for three days now, and we are trying to trace him. We figure, you wanna find a cat, you gotta act like a cat."

Suiting actions to words, Beatbox crawled off, pausing in his progress down 14th Street to let off a plaintive "meow" now and then—usually when a sharp pebble bit into his palm.

Honeyman entered the Brewery. Immediately, someone shouted, "Hey, wipe your feet!"

Honeyman did as ordered, looking around.

The Brewery was now completely renovated. All the black paint had been scraped from the windows, allowing the sunlight to flood the cavernous interior of the first floor. The kettles and vats all gleamed; there were chairs and couches, ping-pong and pool tables, pinball and video games scattered about; and a thick rug covered the floor. There was even a tiled, paint-splattered target area where people could practice firing their Survival-game guns.

A muted subterranean roar from the presses in the basement made Honeyman wince.

Honeyman collared a passing woman, whom he didn't recognize.

"Where's Earl? He called me over."

"In Vat Number One."

Honeyman found the structure labeled Vat Number One. There was a door in its curving metal side. Honeyman knocked; the door swung open.

"Rory, my moll," said Erlkonig, "good to see you. C'mon in."

Honeyman climbed three stairs into the Vat. Erlkonig shut the door.

A padded couch ran along the interior wall of the vat, broken only by the door. The floor was carpeted. There was an audio-video center and a small refrigerator. A giant hookah gave off an aromatic pungency. Ventilation was accomplished through the pipe that had formerly fed in the liquid contents.

"The Beer Nuts have really come up in the world," said Honeyman, with what he hoped was palpable cynicism.

Erlkonig didn't bite. "A pampered worker is a productive worker."

Honeyman snorted. "You call what you do work?"

Erlkonig took umbrage. "Hey, man, you think running a worldwide fiscal empire is easy, why don't you try it? This should be your job anyway. If you hadn't jumped ship on us, I wouldn't have had to pick up the reins."

"That's a mixed metaphor." Then: "Worldwide?"

Erlkonig waved a hand negligently. "Forget I said that. And let's stop bickering. I want to show you something." Erlkonig dug in his pants pocket and came up with a spondulix. Honeyman took it. The ink was blotchy, the sandwich depicted on the front looked like a stack of pancakes, and Honeyman was portrayed on the reverse side with what seemed to be a wen on his nose and a cast in his eye.

Handing the note back, Honeyman said, "I'd fire the guy at the mint responsible for this."

"We didn't do it," said Erlkonig with obvious relish. "It's a counterfeit."

Honeyman had thought he had heard everything, but this took him completely by surprise. He felt personally violated somehow. Bad enough to have the Beer Nuts churning out spondulix in his name, but at least, when all was said and done, they were still his friends. To have strangers making free with his image, as if he were something from the public domain! He felt sullied and sick. Now he knew what it must be like to be the Mona Lisa or the Statue of Liberty.

"We've got to stop this," said Honeyman. "Do you have any idea who's behind this? Have you managed to track them down?"

Erlkonig laughed. "Slow down, man. You're looking at this all wrong. We don't want to stop this, we want to encourage it. We're not the government, and we don't necessarily want a monopoly. The more spondulix in circulation, the better for all parties. There's plenty of wealth in this country, once you free it up from government strictures. Let whoever it is duplicate spondulix. It all helps us undermine the dollar."

Honeyman stood. "I can't believe this. I am now supposed to be known throughout the world as some kind of misshapen hunchback, just so you can keep filling your coffers. This is almost the last straw, Earl. I'm warning you, I'm tempted to blow the whistle on this whole deal."

Erlkonig seemed unconcerned. "How, man? We've got entire city and state governments in the bag."

"What about the Feds? You don't control them yet. I bet they'd love to know about spondulix. In fact, I can't believe they haven't come down on us by now."

This possibility appeared to worry Erlkonig. "You wouldn't really rat on us to the Feds, would you, my moll?"

Honeyman folded his arms across his chest. "I just might."

Erlkonig switched suddenly to easy affability. "What are we doing, talking like this? Ain't no one gonna betray nobody. Listen, did you hear about the big party tomorrow night? It's the official housewarming for the Brewery. Be sure to come, and bring your girl."

The albino ushered Honeyman to the Vat door. "Don't worry yourself about nothing, my moll. Everything's under my intense control." The Vat door slammed before Honeyman could explain that that was precisely what was worrying him.

Outside the building a big flatbed truck was unloading under the supervision of Hy Rez and Special Effects. The cargo was a large wooden spool of some strange kind of thick wire.

"What's that?" asked Honeyman.

The two men appeared surprised that Honeyman didn't know.

"Special polycarbon fibers twisted into the strongest cable known to man," replied Hy.

"For the party," said Special. "You know—the Big Walk."

"Oh," said Honeyman, nowise enlightened. Then he set off to see Addie.

She had promised that today she'd have an answer for him.

On the way to her apartment, Honeyman passed a street musician. The man's open guitar case was filled with loose change, dollar bills and spondulix.

At an open-air ATM set in a bank's exterior wall, a woman removed spondulix from the cash-disgorging slot.

A little kid on a scooter stopped to stare at Honeyman. He took a spondulix from his pocket, studied it, then said, "Wow."

Honeyman felt he was going mad. The world seemed topsy-turvy, some dreamland where everything was a fractured image of his one obsession, spondulix. He fervently hoped Addie's answer would be the one he sought, so that they could begin their lives all over again.

He let himself into Addie's building with his set of keys. (They had exchanged keys in August, after The Night of the Elk.) At Addie's door, he knocked. No answer. He let himself in there too.

Addie's quarters had always been sparsely furnished, with a barely lived-in look, so for a second Honeyman didn't notice that today they were stripped. Empty of personal effects.

There was a sealed envelope on the dresser. In it was a letter.

> Dear Rory,
> Please forgive me. I've been living
> a lie all these months. I never wanted
> to hurt you. But marriage is out of the
> question. Forgive me. Someday soon
> you'll understand.
> I still love you. Honest.
> Addie

HONEYMAN SAT DOWN ON THE COVerless bed. His beard caught the tears before they could drip off his chin.

He never remembered how he got back to the Brewery, and not much about being inside. The main image he retained was that of a steady stream of commiserating Beer Nuts, faces looming up out of his personal fog, saying well-meant but totally dumb and irrelevant things which utterly failed to make him feel any better.

Leather, with an arm around Stud's waist: "She was a bitch, Honeyman."

Studs chimed in: "Yeah, we knew it from the start. You're better off without her."

Hilario Fumento, reading off a library call-slip: "Here's an observation I made recently that might help you put things in perspective, Rory. 'When we are traveling in another state, the sight of a license plate from home always inspires a sharp but transitory melancholy.'"

Ped Xing, in saffron robe: "Meditate on this koan, Rory. 'If the universe is constantly expanding, where does it buy its suits?'"

Beatbox, carrying a pot by its handle and stirring some strange mixture in it: "Taste this, man. Chocolate gazpacho, gonna set you straight."

And finally, Suki Netsuke, who simply stood before Honeyman, honest sympathy visible in her face, and said: "Sorry, Rory." She stooped to give him a chaste kiss on his brow.

Everyone left Honeyman alone with his misery eventually. He welcomed it. He wanted to wallow in some good old self-pity and personality-bashing.

His life was a failure. He had botched everything he ever tried. He was unloved and unlovable. Addie had left him because he was such

a hopeless jerk. Who in their right mind would want to hook up with a guy approaching forty who was still running a sandwich shop, and who had allowed his one outstanding brainstorm—spondulix—to be misappropriated by a bunch of social misfits? All that talk in the note about still loving him had just been her way of trying to salve his feelings. She was too nice to say what she really thought of him. And the note had been too short. A list of his bad qualities would fill reams.

No, it was plain as his disfigured portrait on the counterfeit spondulix: He was a lousy human being.

He felt lower than a tube-worm at the bottom of the Pacific, sheathed in a universe no wider than his own weary shoulders, everything black and under immense pressure.

There really seemed little reason even to go on living.

After a few hours, Honeyman got up from the couch in the corner where he had been sitting. He wandered aimlessly over to Vat Number One, and let himself in.

Erlkonig, wearing a pair of headphones and studying a sheaf of papers, looked up absentmindedly at first, his eyes narrowing in calculation when he saw who it was.

Doffing the phones, he said, "Sit down, moll, sit down. I heard what happened to you, and I been meaning to come around and see you. But the pressure, the details—keeping this whole mess afloat takes all my time."

Honeyman sat down, saying nothing. Erlkonig studied him for a few minutes, evidently coming to a certain decision. Then the Black man said: "Here's something you're gonna find interesting, moll, kinda take your mind off your grief. One thing always bugged me was, where did that word come from?"

"What word?" asked Honeyman tonelessly.

"What word! Spondulix, natch."

Honeyman felt the faintest tickle of interest. "Well?"

"I made Fumento look it up at the library. It's slang from the middle of the last century. Used to be spelled s-p-o-n-d-u-l-i-c-k-s. The derivation is from the Greek word spondolos, or shell. The idea seems to be that the Indians once used shells for money. Wampum, you know. So the word is real Native American, comes from the oppressed Red Man and all. I like that. How'd you learn it?"

"I don't know," said Honeyman. "I don't know anything anymore."

Erlkonig got up and put a hand on Honeyman's shoulder. "You're in a bad way, moll. You need some rest. Wait here a minute." Erlkonig left and returned with a pill and a glass of water. "Here, take this, it'll put you right under."

Honeyman swallowed the pill. Soon he felt sleep creeping up from his feet to his head like quicksand.

Some time much later he woke up. Erlkonig was there with another pill. Honeyman took that one too. What did he care whether he ever woke up again or not?

When he woke up a second time, it was to the sound of much activity. Erlkonig helped him to stand. Honeyman's limbs felt rubbery.

"C'mon, moll, it's the house-warming party, you gotta mingle. It'll do you good."

Honeyman let himself be led out of Vat Number One. The Brewery was packed with people, all having a raucous good time. Erlkonig got Honeyman a drink. "Here, man, you gotta wake up, or you're gonna be too sleepy for the main event."

"What's that?" asked Honeyman.

"You'll see," said Erlkonig. "Wait here a minute, I gotta go check on some preparations."

Honeyman felt himself waking up a little. He couldn't decide if that was good or bad. The pain of Addie's inexplicable departure was sharp as ever. He stood sipping his drink, which seemed to be plain ginger ale. Just as well. He was in no shape for alcohol.

Erlkonig returned. He took Honeyman by the arm and led him away, off to one corner of the building. There was a new door in the wall. Erlkonig opened it. They stepped through, and were inside the Brewery's tall smokestack.

A spiral staircase, lit by bare bulbs strung on a wire, ran up and up and up.

"C'mon, moll," urged Erlkonig.

They began to climb, Honeyman going first.

At the top Honeyman halted unexpectedly, causing Erlkonig to ask, "What's wrong?"

"Where are we going, Earl? I'm dizzy..."

"Don't worry, moll. It's all level from here on."

Honeyman took Erlkonig at his word and mounted the last few steps, emerging headfirst through the floor into a small room. He realized dully that this must be Erlkonig's penthouse, which had been pointed out to him some weeks ago.

Erlkonig joined him. "Now out that door."

"Another door? Where else can we go...?"

"You'll see."

Honeyman opened the door and stepped out.

He was on a small platform railed on two sides. Three hundred feet below him, the street outside the Brewery was filled with tiny people. They were all looking up at him, Honeyman suddenly realized. At that moment a spotlight flared on and pinned Honeyman to the platform, blinding him.

Erlkonig's amplified voice suddenly bellowed out. "Special, you moron—aim it lower!"

SPECIAL EFFECTS, STATIONED ON THE ROOF OF AN adjacent building, complied, and in a minute Honeyman could see again. It was then that he noticed the polycarbon cable. It stretched away across the Hudson, taut as an addict's nerves, slim as a hair, guyed and anchored at its far end to some anonymous building around 23rd Street in Manhattan, half a mile away.

"Here," said Erlkonig. With the hand not holding the bullhorn, he wrestled with a traditional red-and-white-striped, fifteen-foot balancing pole that had been standing in one corner.

Honeyman took the pole and hefted it. The fifty-pound weight awakened long-dormant kinesthetic memories.

"OK, let's go, moll. They're all waiting to see you perform."

Honeyman thought about it. The distance was impossible. He was completely out of training. The wind was brisk. The effects of the sleeping pill were still in his blood...

He kicked off his shoes and stood in his socks.

Erlkonig smiled. "If you make it to the other side, you can tell the Feds anything you want."

Honeyman stepped forward and placed his right foot on the wire. It thrummed like something alive beneath his weight, it sang an old wordless circus song, it beckoned him on to his destiny.

He stepped entirely on the cable, swaying slightly, old instincts keeping him balanced.

Erlkonig spoke through the bullhorn to the spectators. "And now, as advertised, to mark the conquest of the outer world by spondulix, their inventor, Rory Honeyman, will symbolically traverse the watery gap between Hoboken, the world's new fiscal capital, and Manhattan, the old."

Honeyman began his half-mile tightrope walk, the spotlight following him, trained on his back now.

Right up to the halfway point, he thought he might do it.

But at that point in his passage a news copter, avid cameraman leaning out the cockpit, approached from inside the surrounding darkness, clattering and churning up crazy downdrafts.

Honeyman sensed balance slipping from him. He swayed left and right, overcompensating, trapped in a deadly negative feedback loop. He lost his pole and it flipped end over end down into the night beneath his feet.

Then he lost the wire.

The wind whistled past Honeyman, chill and curious. For a few seconds he fell formless and free. He swore he heard the roar of Olympic crowds in his ears. Without volition, not even thinking of saving himself, he entered into a classic swan dive.

He was back in the past, on the last day in his life he had felt completely certain about anything, the day when, full of a serene spiritual

strength, he had taken the silver in Mexico City.

He pierced the water cleanly—celestial judges flashed high numbers—but the impact was still tremendous. The transition felt like passing through a mile-thick wall of wet concrete instantaneously. He must have blacked out for a period, still plummeting downward under the Hudson now, because when he opened his eyes all was utterly black, and he seemed to sense the musty car-hulk-littered river bottom just below him.

Unbroken empty blackness. Just give it up now, or what? So easy to breathe water, become sodden and sink to lay among the other wrecks...

Except—wait a minute. Here was something of interest. A nonhuman figure of luminescent white was approaching. Closer, closer, closer—until it was revealed as a horse. A sea-horse, hindquarters all flukes and fins.

The Baroness von Hammer-Purgstall, returned transmogrified from the dead. First love come to resurrect him.

Honeyman opened his mouth to speak. Riverwater filled his throat and he began to choke.

The Baroness nipped Honeyman's shirt collar between her big teeth and began to surge powerfully upward, through the murky water.

Honeyman's head broke the surface right near a Coast Guard boat. Dazedly, he looked around for the Baroness. The horse was nowhere to be seen.

Hands reached down for Honeyman. He reached up, and was hauled aboard.

Laying flat on his back, his head cradled in a soft lap, he knew he was really dead.

Addie was looking down at him and stroking his forehead.

"Oh, Rory," she said, "I'm so, so sorry. But you're under arrest."

A man's voice said, "That's enough, Agent Swinburne, I'll take over now."

They read Honeyman his rights while he was throwing up Hudson-flavored bile.

HONEYMAN STEPPED OUT OF THE hospital. It was a glorious October day. The streets of Manhattan had been washed clean by a shower in the night. A maple sapling planted in a sidewalk plot was all aflame with colored leaves. The air smelled like the countryside.

Addie stood by the tree. Honeyman walked over to her. She held out her hand tentatively. He took it, and they began to walk.

After a few yards of silence, Addie said, "Erlkonig took the whole rap for you, Rory. He exonerated you completely."

"So I should forgive him everything now, I suppose?"

"That's up to you. He did act like a bastard at the end. But basically I think he was just running scared. It was nothing personal."

"It felt personal enough at the time."

"Well, anyway, he's only going to be tried on the charges connected with running the tightrope across the river. Public nuisance, property damage, obstructing air traffic, those kinds of things. The matter of spondulix has been officially dropped, in exchange for the closing of the mint. It seems, you see, that there weren't really any relevant statutes to prosecute under. A whole squad of lawyers spent hundreds of man-hours trying to find something, and couldn't. There's just no legislation against what you guys were doing. And besides, the publicity connected with a trial would have given other people the same idea, if they hadn't heard about it already. The people in charge have decided to adopt a policy of ignoring the spondulix already in circulation, as long as no more new ones are made. They figure the whole thing will fade away sooner or later."

"So I'm completely free?"

"Yup."

"I can go back to running a sandwich shop in Hoboken?"

"If you want to."

"Well now, that depends."

"On me?"

"Yup."

Addie smiled. "Suppose I told you I don't work for the Secret Service any more?"

"I might believe you."

"And suppose I told you I still loved you very very much, and apologized real hard for ever lying to you about anything?"

"I might say I loved you too."

They stopped to kiss then, and passersby smiled.

Resuming their walk, Honeyman said, "You wouldn't mind living on the proceeds of a little sandwich shop?"

"Oh," said Addie, "I don't think it'll ever come to that."

She opened her purse.

Honeyman looked inside.

It was full of spondulix. □

SPOILS OF WAR

BY WILLIAM JOHN WATKINS

SOME WAR IN THE WHO-KNOWS-WHEN,
this wounded ship came here to die
where it sits bleeding silver in the sand
out of the wound that rattles with its pain;
some weapon burrowed through and burst
a hole you couldn't throw a stone across
out through its side.
We live in peace here just the same.

The wind and sand scrags ate it clean for years
while we were wandering, looking for a home,
some watering place that we could give a name.
We saw it shining from a day away.
It's big enough for tribes, and tribes there are,
one to a level, halfway to the sky.
We live in peace here just the same.

The death ship gives us water and a sweetish gruel,
it keeps the sun off and the boiling rain,
and sometimes when the stars are right, it sings
of bloody glory and of warrior's death,
of places burned we cannot even name.
The gruel runs bitter when it sings.
We live in peace here just the same. □

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Though life will be very different in the ninety-fifth century, some things will never change.

STRIKER OUT

BY BRUCE BOSTON

Illustration by Marc Sasso

WHAT ENDED FOR STEEL STRIKER with the night and a blonde and the river began that afternoon in the Stardock Lounge. Whoever had arranged to meet him at 2:00 P.M. Galactic Standard was late. Damn late, he thought, unless they were already on Daylight Saving. Or would that make them later?

Striker dismissed the question. He was a man of action. His steel gray eyes surveyed the empty bar, missing nothing. Through the observation window and a heavy veil of rain, he could see the sodden landing fields of Starport in the near distance. A few silver rockets pointed their tips skyward. Soon they would plunge into the inky vacuum beyond, bridging the unimaginable gaps between stars. Soon they would enter a realm where up was down and down was up. Soon they would streak through the cosmos at speeds beyond the boundaries of light. Striker looked away. He was starting to feel dizzy.

In his space boots and silver jumpsuit, it was clear that Striker was no planet-bound local. Just to make sure, he'd had a comet tattooed on his right cheek. He took another swallow of the drink before him, his third Silesian swampdog. It was his favorite drink—part gin, part vermouth, part dog—and one of the few luxuries he allowed himself in his otherwise Spartan existence. He stared at himself in the mirror behind the bar, practicing first a menacing sneer, then a seductive smile. His rugged features creased and the comet splayed its tail.

"Mr. Striker?"

Striker spun on the barstool and went for the ripper at his belt. Ever since the photon caper on Trigon, voices out of nowhere made him jump. He glanced down and his lean form relaxed. Two squat Oblongians stood before him. He was not sure how long they had been there. So what, Striker thought, all Oblongians look alike anyway.

"Who the bloody hell do you *******ing think I am?" he answered, his thin lips barely parting. Vulgarity wasn't an affectation with Striker, but a way of life.

"Sorry we're late." The first Oblongian bobbed his neckless head. "Shall we take a table where we can talk more privately?"

Striker rose and the odd trio moved across the room, the Oblongians' stubby legs taking two steps for every one of the Earthman's.

The Oblongians were a strange and somber race, shaped as their name implies. They lived on the planet Ob, somewhere near the galactic core. Except for their squashed stature, they were roughly humanoid in appearance. One might logically assume that such a shape had evolved due to the heavy gravitational pull of their planet. In truth, it had more to do with low doorways, which had been an architectural motif on Ob for untold centuries. On their home world

the Oblongians breathed an atmosphere of fumaric acid and ozone. Since Ob had no atmosphere whatsoever, they had to import this mixture in large quantities. Their appearance at Starport, principal trade center for the known universe, was a common occurrence. One might well ask how life managed to evolve on a world with no atmosphere. As galactic historians have noted: "It wasn't easy."

Once they were seated, the Oblongians' broad chins came to the edge of the table, where they rested them. The robotender glided up on soundless treads and took their order. Orange sodas. The Oblongian found orange soda highly intoxicating.

"Well, Mr. Striker," the first Oblongian began, "I am TakVal and this is CeeWit." The second Oblongian sipped his soda, staring at Steel with large sad eyes. "We have arranged to meet because we have a job for you."

Striker had heard these words countless times before. In a robot slave camp on Rigel IV, beneath the dying red sun of Crouton VII, on an antigrav bed in a pleasure bubble tracking a disintegrating orbit round the triple moons of Denudia. Some men fixed sinks. Others laid macadam or built fusion reactors. Life had never been so simple for Striker. The torrent of raw individualism that coursed unstoppered through his veins had carried him along less common tributaries. "We have a job for you." And again and again he had taken on the challenge. Sometimes it led to high adventure, romance, often to danger. Yet Striker had no choice. Adventure was his calling, danger his profession, romance his *pas de deux*. And he usually needed the money.

"The utmost discretion is necessary in this matter," TakVal continued. "CeeWit and I are ostensibly here only as traders. On our home world we breathe an atmosphere of..."

"We already know that," Striker cut him short. "Get on with it."

Striker was using the authorial "we." TakVal, who had not yet realized he was in the middle of a space opera, and for that matter couldn't even hit high C, looked confused. But the sense of command in Striker's voice was something few men could deny. Even oblong ones.

"Our true mission concerns the Crown of Ob," TakVal went on, his voice sinking lower in the empty bar. "In less than two weeks Galactic, Sloozie, first daughter of the Grand Seer of Ob, is scheduled to wed Cremon of the Pyramidians. This marriage represents a political union we have long sought. It will end generations of warfare between our planets. Part of the dowry in this arrangement, the principal part, is the Crown of Ob! The Pyramidians have prized it for centuries, not only for its value, but because they believe it was once the Crown of Pyr."

"Nonsense!" CeeWit carped vehemently. "The crown is oblong. If any filthy Pyramidian tried to wear it, it would fall over his accursed eyes."

"Be that as it may," TakVal raised a stubby, blue-furred paw, "the Crown of Ob has been stolen. Perhaps merely by some freebooter in search of a ready profit. Perhaps by those who would rather not see peace between our planets."

"And you want me to recover it for you," Striker intuited mirthlessly.

TakVal leaned back and began fumbling in his coat. Striker's hand edged toward the bloom gun in his shoulder holster. You couldn't be too careful when dealing with aliens. That's how you stayed alive in the ninety-fifth century.

TakVal drew forth an oblong envelope and passed it across the table. Striker examined the contents: several packs of banded bills—nearly ten thousand starbucks, he estimated—a few blue hairs, and a holographic postcard of what was no doubt the Crown of Ob. Rubies, diamonds, black-bottomed pearls, segue stones from the luminous pits of Betelgeuse VI, insect crystals from Carapace...in short, it was the gaudiest piece of kitsch Striker had ever seen. It was no doubt worth a fortune.

TakVal put down his soda and burped plosively. "We have reason to believe the Crown will be traded here at Starport on the black market. And yes, we want you to recover it for us. We will pay handsomely to buy it outright, or we will pay you handsomely to obtain it by whatever means possible. I trust the advance is sufficient."

Striker shook out the blue hairs and pocketed the envelope. "I'll take the job, but there's one thing I want to know."

"Yes?"

If Starport was the melting pot of the galaxy, then Thieves' Quarter was its slag heap: a crazy patchwork of makeshift shanties and tumble-down hovels housing the thieves, cutthroats and pimps...

"If you Oblongians breathe an atmosphere of fumaric acid and ozone, how come you're not wearing face masks?"

"That's simple. We're holding our breath."

"Holding your breath!"

"Yes," CeeWit answered from between clenched teeth. "But believe me, it isn't easy."

AS STRIKER MADE HIS WAY SOUTH TO THIEVES' QUARTER, THE STREETS and buildings of Starport glistened like some great metal monster in the falling sheets of rain. The gutters trundled thick rivulets, gurgling plaintively. The falling droplets soaked his jumpsuit. They beat a steady tattoo on his head and plastered his hair to his skull. If this kept up, he might have to buy an umbrella.

If Starport was the melting pot of the galaxy, then Thieves' Quarter was its slag heap: a crazy patchwork of makeshift shanties and tumble-down hovels housing the thieves, cutthroats, pimps, black marketeers, lawyers, con men and assorted dregs of the city. Needless to say, it was an environment in which Striker felt perfectly at home. There he would begin his search for the Crown of Ob. But first things first. He hadn't eaten since breakfast and those starbucks were burning a hole in his pocket. He turned into the first Old Earth restaurant he saw.

In a booth at the rear of the room, his back safely to the wall, Striker ordered a filet mignon smothered in mushrooms, a baked potato, a Caesar salad, and a chocolate soda. Of course none of the food was real, but synthesized from products better left unmentioned. If one thought about it too much, it was enough to make a man sick. Striker had no problems on that count.

As he was sawing off the last bite of steak, someone slid into the seat opposite him. A rodentlike countenance and a pair of narrow shoulders confronted him. It was Weasel Snokes, a petty fence with whom Striker had often done business in the past, a man not to be trusted.

Striker set down his fork. He pretended to scratch his side as he reached for the sulfuric gas grenade under his left arm. Weasel did

likewise. It was their standard greeting, only this time Striker scratched a little too hard. The robobeetle holding the grenade slithered down his sleeve, went—splat!—on the floor, and the smoke began to rise. Striker and Weasel bolted from the booth and out the front door with a crowd of diners not far behind. The robowaiters were the last to emerge, rolling back and forth, waving checks and amplifying their voices up and down the rain-drenched street.

Striker and Weasel ran several blocks in the downpour, until they'd left the melee behind. They stopped to catch their breath beneath the awning of a drexl shop. Striker laughed. He'd beaten another check, and it felt good. He pulled a pack of joysticks from his pocket and offered one to Weasel. Weasel sniffed the stick, his nostrils twitching, then bit off one end and began to chew. Despite his claim that he was entirely human, Weasel's resemblance to certain furry scavengers was hard to deny.

"What's up?" Striker asked, lighting up his own joystick.

"Big Loose has a special shipment in," Weasel drawled. "He thought you might be interested."

Striker gave him a steely once-over. Big Loose was the largest black marketeer in Starport. "Since when have you been working for Loose? I thought you were an independent."

"Ever since Dan Brady busted all my other connections," Weasel told him, "That's when."

Brady was the police chief of Starport, a blue-eyed, black-haired son of Tralee, who sported a meerschaum pipe and an impish grin. (A stereotypical Irish cop has no business in a story taking place in the ninety-fifth century. But try to tell that to Dan Brady!) Coincidentally, Brady was also the schizoid double personality of Big Loose. Half the criminals in Starport knew that Brady and Loose were the same man, but Loose/Brady had nothing to worry about. They may have been thieves, cutthroats, pimps, con men and assorted dregs, but they weren't snitches.

"What's so special about this shipment?" Striker took another drag on the joystick.

Weasel reached for his breast pocket. Striker opened his mouth as he exhaled and got ready to fire the laser cannon embedded in his wisdom tooth. But it was only a holographic picture postcard that Weasel pulled forth and held out for him to see. Rubies, diamonds, black-bottomed pearls, segue stones from the luminous pits of Betelgeuse, insect crystals from Carapace...in short, it was the gaudiest piece of kitsch he'd had ever seen. The Crown of Ob.

Striker leaned back against the window of the drexl shop and crossed his arms. "How much is he asking?"

"It's not an item that Loose wants to fool with. There's politics mixed up in this deal. He'll take five thousand."

Striker whistled. That left nearly five thousand for himself, enough to keep him in steak and swampdogs for quite awhile. He could even afford to get his hair styled. "When can I see the merchandise?"

"Nine o'clock tonight." Weasel slipped the postcard back into his pocket. "The deserted warehouse on Stardock Twelve. And come alone," he warned. "No tricks!" With a final twitch of his nostrils he disappeared into the shimmering sheets of rain.

It was coming down harder than ever as Striker headed back to his office. He threw his head back and took a couple of swallows. He was feeling pleased with himself and more than a little high. There was no longer any need to go to Thieves' Quarter since it had come to him. Only one thing troubled him. What the hell was a drexl anyway?

THE LIFT WAS BROKEN AGAIN, SO STRIKER CLIMBED THE THREE flights of stairs. The lights burning behind his office door made the inscription on the frosted glass stand out. He paused for a moment to admire it.

STEEL STRIKER
INTERSTELLAR TROUBLE SHOOTER
STAR-TANNED MERCENARY
SPACE DICK

The comet pictured below the legend mirrored the one on his cheek.

Only after he'd opened the door and stepped inside did Striker remember that he hadn't left the lights on. By then it was too late. Something large, hard, and heavy landed on the back of his skull and the lights went out...to return in a sickening blur.

He was lying in the puddle left by his wet clothes. The dirty smell of the carpet bristled up his nostrils. There were bumper cars colliding at full tilt between his temples.

Striker staggered to his feet and checked his pockets. The ten thousand starbucks was gone. He groaned and stumbled to the file cabinet. Under "S" he found three nearly empty bottles, but enough to put together one swampdog. Though it was a little light on the dog.

His head was still clanging as he moved past his desk toward the couch at the far end of the room. He noticed his broken-down robosecretary pitched against the wall, a loose tangle of metal limbs and dangling wires. Its bleak silver eyes stared at him balefully. Striker gave it a couple of kicks before settling down.

He leaned back and sipped his drink, attempting to clear his thoughts. On the table before him there was a thick dogeared volume, a collection of ancient detective novels by a man named Chandler, one of half a dozen writers to survive from Old Earth. The book was something of a bible for Striker. Now he flipped it open at random, seeking solace.

> *She was stretched out on a modernistic chaise lounge with her slippers off, so I stared at her legs in the sheerest silk stockings. They seemed to be arranged to stare at. They were visible to the knee and one of them well beyond. The knees were dimpled, not bony and sharp. The calves were beautiful, the ankles long and slim with enough melodic line for a tone poem. She was tall and rangy and strong-looking.*

Striker's features clouded over and he slammed the book shut. He gulped the rest of his drink. Slowly he looked to the ceiling and raised one fist. He shook it as if he were cursing the heavens beyond. "I get the bumps on the head! I do the stake-outs in the rain! I take the cases no one else will touch! Just for once, why can't there be a leggy blond in one of these stupid plots?"

When he looked up, she was standing in the open doorway. She was tall and rangy and strong-looking. Her hair was a fine tawny wave much longer than the current fashion, and she had the kind of tan only the rich can afford. Striker stared at her legs in the sheerest silk stockings. They seemed to be made to stare at. The calves were beautiful, the ankles long and thin with more than enough melodic line for a space opera.

"Who were you talking to?" she asked, glancing around the room. Her eyes were clear and hard, but there was something in them that could warm to the right man.

"That was nothing," he muttered. "Just my creator."

"I'd hardly expected to find a man in your profession praying out loud to a supreme being."

"Forget him. There's nothing supreme about that one." Striker showed her to a chair. "But what can I do for you, Miss...?"

She sat down, crossing one svelte silk leg over the other. "It's not Miss, it's Princess. Princess Sloozie of Ob. But my friends call me Muffin."

Striker arched a brow bemusedly. "*You're* Princess Sloozie?" He made it back around the desk and collapsed into his chair. He needed another swampdog.

"You probably expected me to be oblong." Sloozie clumped an oversized handbag onto his desk and drew a cigarette from its side pocket. She waited for Striker to lean across the desk and light it. "You're wrong. I'm half human, on my mother's side, and all Oblongian genes are recessive."

Striker leaned back. He had just noticed the blue fur on her palms. "*All* of them?" he asked.

"Well...almost all," Sloozie insisted. "How else do you think they

could get drunk on vitamin C?" She uncrossed her legs and crossed them again. Striker decided he could get used to a little blue fur.

"Assuming you are Princess Sloozie," he said, "What can I do for you?"

"I want you to find something for me. Something...." She opened the handbag and began fishing through its contents. One of Striker's hands slipped under the edge of his desk. If Sloozie made one false move, he could release the trapdoor beneath her chair and she'd find herself disarrayed in the office of a Cluvian cost accountant. But it was only a holographic postcard that she handed across the desk. Rubies, diamonds, segue stones from...to make a long sentence short, it was the Crown of Ob.

"But two emissaries from your planet have already hired me to find the Crown."

"I want you to find it," Sloozie explained, "and then I want you to lose it again. For good. It's the only way to stop the marriage." Suddenly her eyes were watery and she dabbed them with an oblong handkerchief. "I could never love a Pyramidian. Think of all those sharp edges! And what would our children be? Dodecahedrons?"

Striker had had enough solid geometry for one day. He was about to tell Sloozie that he couldn't help her because of a conflict of interests, he was about to explain professional ethics, when she laid several stacks of banded bills on the desk. There must have been nearly ten thousand starbucks. In fact, it markedly resembled the money he had just lost, right down to a few blue hairs clinging to the surface of the paper.

"That's not all I can offer," Sloozie breathed deeply.

Striker considered his options. He could use Sloozie's money to buy the Crown and then lose it again as she suggested. That would mean crossing TakVal and CeeWit. He'd never tried anything like that on his other cases, but he ought to be able to step out of character just once and get away with it. And who knew what might happen with Sloozie? He envisioned himself on Ob, royal consort to the princess. Apparently a leggy blonde and a pocketful of starbucks weren't enough for him.

Sloozie leaned across the desk and placed her palm on the back of his hand. The fur tickled. "You will help me, won't you, Mr. Striker?"

"Of course I will. And call me Steel," he said, blushing. No one but his mother had ever called him that.

As Sloozie rose, Striker came around the desk to escort her to the door. In the open doorway she turned into his arms.

"I knew I could count on you!"

She put her tongue down his throat a few times. It tasted like clover, like sunshine, like a world without sorrow or strife. Most of all it tasted like a tongue, warm and wet with saliva. Striker liked it. He reached out for some more, but Sloozie pushed him away.

"Not now," she said. Her eyes seemed to say that later would be fine. "I need to pick up some drexls, and the shops close at five."

She was gone before Striker could ask her what a drexl was. What the hell, he thought, this far in the future I can't be expected to keep track of everything.

Back at his desk he riffled the starbucks and thought about calling out for some swampdogs. For the first time, he noticed that the message light on his vidphone was blinking. He pressed the replay button and a swirl of colors on the screen resolved itself into the face of Police Chief Dan Brady, smiling through his meerschaum pipe.

"A word to the wise, Mr. Striker," Brady held up a holographic postcard of the Crown of Ob. "Stay clear of this one or I'll have your license. It's over your head. That's a promise, not a threat. Official police business. Off limits. Verboten. No tank tops. Keep off the grass. And please curb your dog." The colors swirled away and the screen went blank.

Striker leaned back and scratched his comet thoughtfully as he mused over the particulars of the case. What strange double game was Loose/Brady playing? How much longer could the Oblongians hold their breaths? Did Weasel really get stoned by *eating* joysticks?

More than one question at a time always made him sleepy. Since several hours remained before his rendezvous at Stardock Twelve, he decided to take a nap. On the way to the couch he thought about kicking his robosecretary a few more times. But somehow, now that he had met Sloozie, the thrill was gone.

BY A QUARTER TO NINE STRIKER WAS ON THE STREET AGAIN. IF HE hadn't been trying to show off, he might have made it to the stardocks without incident. But the rain had momentarily stopped, so he undid the top two buttons of his jumpsuit and put on his sunglasses. Since the sun had set several hours before, this made it hard to see, especially when he took the shortcut down Aldebaran Alley. Just as he was emerging from the alley, something large, hard and heavy landed at the base of his skull.

He came to covered with mud and water.

TakVal and CeeWit were bending over him. They were wearing face masks. At least one of his questions was answered.

"Mr. Striker! Mr. Striker!" CeeWit chirped irascibly, "What are you doing?"

"Just playing possum," Striker muttered as he sat up and felt in his pockets. He groaned and rubbed his head. The ten thousand starbucks was gone. The bumper cars were back.

"There's no time for games," TakVal told him. "We are already late and we have to hurry. We have received a message regarding the subject we discussed earlier." He handed Striker a postcard. It was another holo of the Crown of Ob. Somebody was making a fortune off the damn things, Striker thought.

"No!" CeeWit erupted venomously, "Look at the other side."

Striker turned the card over and read the message.

"If you want it, bring five thousand starbucks to the empty warehouse on Stardock Twelve at nine o'clock. And no tricks! Come alone."

Just then lightning discharged across the sky. Batteries of thunder rumbled up and down the street. There was total silence for a few seconds. Then the droplets began to splatter the pavement in a quickening rush. Striker picked up CeeWit under one arm and TakVal under the other and sprinted in the direction of the stardocks.

A robowino manning a nearby lamppost watched the peculiar trio hurry past. "Fleshlings could certainly be amusing creatures," it thought. "If only they'd slow down a little. All that running around was bad for the hinges."

OUTSIDE THE HULKING DOME OF THE WAREHOUSE THEY RAN INTO A drenched Sloozie. Striker dropped both Oblongians and picked her up instead. Her oversized handbag clumped against his leg.

"Ow!" Striker exclaimed stentoriously, "What have you got in that thing, a howitzer?"

"Just a jar of drexls," Sloozie answered, eyes wide with innocence.

So they came in jars, Striker thought. That's right. He almost had it now. He could practically see them. They were small and round and...

Sloozie broke into his reverie and the image vanished. "I just received a message. It said to come alone and bring five thousand starbucks. It said I could buy back the Crown. We must save it," she proclaimed dramatically. "Otherwise the marriage will never take place and the warfare between our planets will continue." She winked at Striker.

"Take it easy," he whispered in her ear. "These guys may be oblong, but they're not dense." The odor of her wet hair filled his nostrils, and impossible as it seemed, it smelled just like a swampdog. Striker was in love.

He put Sloozie down to open the warehouse door, but he kept her close by his side. The four would-be Crown buyers advanced into total darkness. The only sound was the rain pelting the metal roof. "Tell me something about that blue fur." Striker said to Sloozie.

"What would you like to know?"

"Is it on the soles of your feet too?"

"You're a big boy, Steel. Why don't you find out for yourself?"

As Striker was trying to decide where to begin, lights flared on through the warehouse. They staggered in the sudden brightness. A weaselly voice spoke up from behind them. "Put your hands over your heads and keep walking."

Striker glanced over his shoulder. It was Snokes, with a microwave rifle on wide scan. He could parbroil them all in under a minute. Striker liked his meat rare, so he did as he was told.

"That's far enough!"

As they stopped in the center of the floor, a maniacal laugh echoed through the rafters. Striker looked up. Directly in front of them, atop two packing crates, with elevator shoes that went to the top floor, stood Big Loose. He wore a porkpie hat and a carnation in his buttonhole. His pants were unzipped. They didn't call him Big Loose for nothing.

"Don't try anything funny, Striker," Big Loose told him. "My defense beam has temporarily scrambled your arsenal."

"What do you mean, scrambled?"

"See for yourself," Big Loose grinned.

Striker checked the ripper at his belt. It had become a badminton puck. The gas grenade in his armpit was now a rhyming dictionary. And the laser cannon embedded in his wisdom tooth had been transformed into a drexl. At last he remembered what they were. He coughed the slimy thing up and spat it onto the floor.

"What's your game, Loose?"

"We have brought the money," TakVal said. "Where is the Crown?"

"The Crown?" Big Loose laughed again. "Don't you know that anyone can buy a postcard?"

"You'll never get away with it, Loose." Striker edged forward as he spoke.

"Oh yeah, who's going to stop me?" Loose jeered. "Why don't you go tell your friend Dan Brady. That dumb mick has been trying to put me away for years."

Thunder sounded right outside the warehouse. The lights flickered several times and died. Striker saw his chance and he took it. He dived low and hard, and luck was with him. The packing crates were empty. He could hear Big Loose's scream as he toppled to the floor. As the lights came back on, Striker leaped several feet and brought the rhyming dictionary down hard on Weasel's knuckles.

"You didn't have to do that!" the fence cried out, rubbing his hand. There were tears in his eyes as Striker took the rifle away from him.

"Oh, Steel!" Sloozie cried, running to his side.

Big Loose emerged from a tumbled heap of boxes. He zipped up his pants, took out his meerschaum pipe, and advanced upon them. "All right, everybody. Freeze! You're all under arrest."

"Oh, God!" Weasel shouted. "He's gone schizoid again. He's turned into Brady."

As Brady fished a pair of handcuffs from his coat pocket and advanced on Striker, Sloozie stepped to one side. With seeming expertise she swung her handbag—large, hard, and heavy—against the back of the police chief's head. The Irishman went down like a sack of potatoes.

Large, hard, and heavy, Striker thought. Large, hard, and heavy. It had a very familiar ring to it. In his office that afternoon. In the darkness of Aldebaran Alley. Suddenly it was all coming together for him. Before he could consider the consequences, before he could adapt his earlier Machiavellian calculations to the situation at hand, Striker's instincts took over. He grabbed the handbag from Sloozie. Digging deep within its mysterious feminine depths, past congeries of equally mysterious objects, he drew forth rubies, diamonds, black-bottomed pearls, segue stones, and insect crystals. More than a bit dented from all the blows it had been delivering, it was still the Crown of Ob, in all its gaudy socko splendor. A loud clap of thunder heralded its appearance.

"Wow!" said Striker, holding the crown up to the light. "I never realized it before, but when you look at it the right way...you know...well...gee...it's almost like a work of art."

"You sap!" Sloozie snarled. "We could have been together."

"It would have never worked out, baby," Striker told her. "Drexls give me indigestion."

Sloozie had only hired him—more important, only put her tongue down his throat—to throw suspicion away from herself. Now he had emerged as the good guy once again. Striker recalled his plans to step out of character. He saw himself on Ob, ensconced in a velvet and satin bed chamber, stud exemplar, a naked Sloozie stretched languorously by his side. He gave a brief mental flip to the heavens above.

The two Oblongians were burbling with delight. It was an extremely unpleasant sound, like a clogged drain coughing up air.

Striker checked the ripper at his belt. The gas grenade in his armpit was now a rhyming dictionary. And the laser cannon embedded in his wisdom tooth had been transformed into a drexl.

"How can we ever thank you, Mr. Striker?" TakVal said, reaching up to take the crown.

"Some starbucks would nice," Striker told him.

"You can bill us care of the Royal Palace on Ob," CeeWit answered. He had retrieved Brady's handcuffs and was snapping them on Sloozie's wrists. Now that they had what they wanted, the Oblongians' generosity seemed to have ebbed.

Weasel was helping Brady/Loose to his feet. The Irishman stared around for a moment before fastening on Striker and advancing toward him again. "Didn't I warn you to stay clear of this one, gumshoe?"

Thunder sounded once more and the entire warehouse shook. Suddenly there was water streaming about their ankles. The floor was moving. Brady paused and looked around. "Sure and begorrah," he exclaimed, "it's finally happened."

"What?" Striker asked.

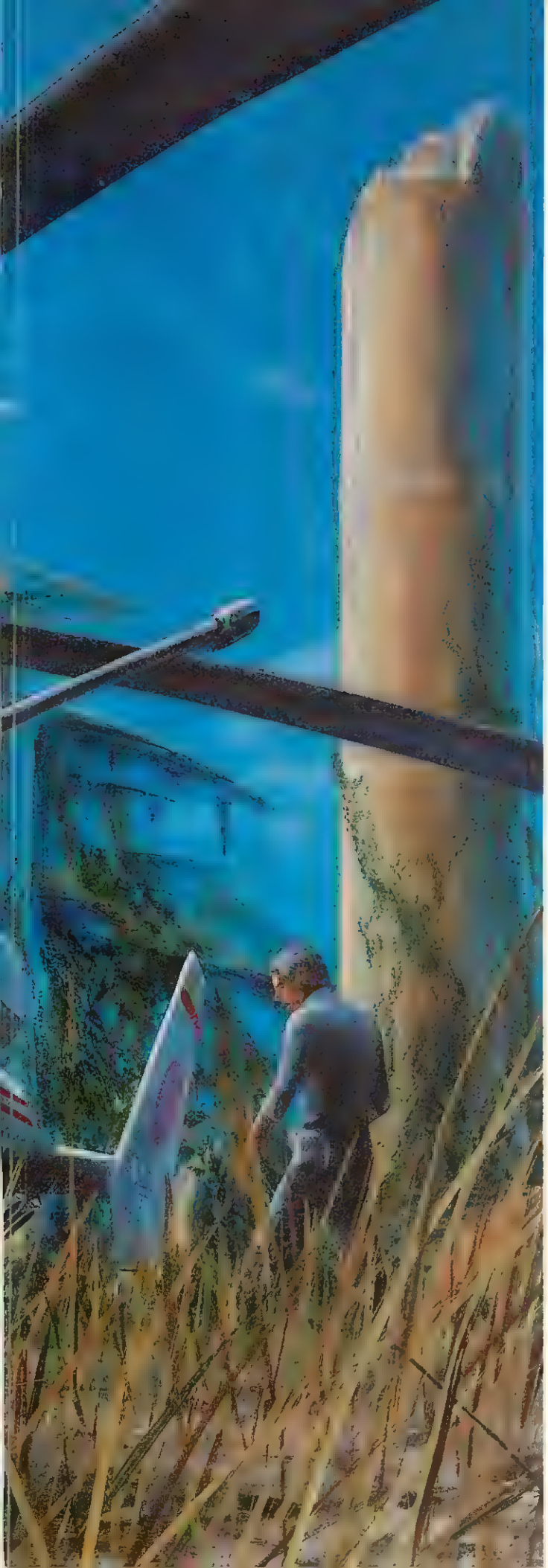
"It's finally rained too much, my boy."

And Brady was right. The entire city of Starport—streets, buildings, drexl shops, postcards, robowinos and assorted dregs—had come loose from its moorings and was moving downstream. The Oblongians were already swimming, and Weasel had scurried up an I-beam into the rafters.

Striker slipped in the running water and struggled to his feet. Sloozie's handcuffed arms encircled him from behind. He couldn't tell whether she was trying to throttle him or had something kinky in mind. As the waters continued to rise, as Sloozie's hair enveloped him in the bittersweet aroma of swampdog and her teeth closed upon his neck, Striker looked to the ceiling of the warehouse, to the heavens beyond. A mask of unadulterated rage strapped itself across his rugged features.

"I'll get you for this," he screamed. "If it's the last thing I ever do, I'll get you!"

And maybe he would. But one thing was for sure. It wouldn't be easy. □



BIO UNIVERSITY

BY DANIEL HOOD

Illustration by Mark Maxwell

FAR OUT IN THE HILLS beyond the port, Fletcher could hear the thump of the seismic detonators and the constant, deeper thump of the factory helicopters. Standing on the rotting piers of Abidjan, he peered inland, drinking in the lush greens. Perspiration had stuck his thin shirt to his skin, but he did not mind.

Fletcher reveled in Africa as he had once reveled in the sea: he loved its scope, its vastness, the riches it hid in its warm folds. In his youth he had gone to the sea like a lover; as an old man he wished he could approach Africa the same way, but the seismic detonators thumped and the helicopters dotted the sky like buzzards. They would tame the vastness and reduce the scope, leaving him with nothing.

He heard footsteps behind him, clacking on the

concrete. He turned, annoyed in advance at the interruption. They had little time for his work, little respect for his purposes, and yet they plagued him continually. His expression softened slightly when he saw who it was: Mariam El-Ghanzouri, the director of the expedition.

"Dr. Fletcher," she said, gasping slightly in the heat. She wore a heavy suit that covered her from sole to neck, and her respirator mask.

She must be dying in that, he thought, and frowned.

She frowned back, noting his shirt and shorts, and his exposed, moon-white, knobby legs.

"Shouldn't you be wearing a mask?" El-Ghanzouri was considerably younger than he was, and had not yet come to terms with her position over him.

"I'm immune," he said, though that was not strictly true. "I've been to Africa several times. I've had everything there is to have."

"All life is one," she said reflexively and, when he grimaced at the credo, hurried on: "One of the scout choppers has found something."

"Have they," he muttered, unimpressed. They were always finding something. None of them had ever seen a wild animal.

"Yes," she said.

Why did I come to Africa? To validate this butchery? To sift through the carnage of idiot boys with a new god?

"It's probably another dog, Mariam. Did you know there are over 1,000 different kinds of dogs here?"

It will be no different than the ocean. You show them a wonder, and they cry 'Dinner!'

"It's not really a something, Dr. Fletcher. It's a someone. A person."

This stopped him. "Ah. I see. Is the chopper crew here?"

Is this why I came to Africa?

"Yes, at headquarters."

"I'll come along."

Sometimes he thought he had come to Africa to die.

THE HEADQUARTERS SHIP WAS THE LARGEST OF the sixteen that dotted the harbor. It was a warren of holds and narrow corridors and tiny cabins. If El-Ghanzouri hadn't led him, Fletcher would never have found the briefing room.

The chopper crew was lounging, chatting and laughing with El-Ghanzouri's executive officer. They straightened up and stopped talking when the two entered.

"All life is one," the pilot said, a hesitant smile flickering across his lips.

El-Ghanzouri smiled. "Please tell Dr. Fletcher what you saw."

The pilot turned to Fletcher and faltered, put off by the old man's cold stare. "Well, we, uh, we were flying."

"Of course you were flying," the exec said, looking coldly at Fletcher. He had seen the old man roll his eyes at the pilot's greeting.

"Right," the pilot continued, gulping a little. "And we saw this guy."

Fletcher cleared his throat. "You're sure it was a man?"

"Well, no—I mean, it could have been a woman...."

"But it was human?"

"Oh yeah. Definitely human." The pilot shuddered. It was estimated that there were no more than a few thousand people on the whole continent, and those sure to be infected with one of three plagues.

"Where was this?"

"A couple of hundred klics north of here—the map said the place was called Yamassoukrou."

"Yamassoukrou," Fletcher echoed.

"Do you know it?" asked El-Ghanzouri.

"Yes," he said, though this was not entirely true. He had heard of it, but never been there. "There's supposed to be a church there. An old Catholic church."

The exec frowned. "Great."

"I imagine you want to go there," El-Ghanzouri said, and it was clear that she hoped he would say no.

So Fletcher paused, then smiled: "Right now."

The exec dismissed the helicopter crew and waited to speak until they were gone. Then he closed the door of the briefing room and turned on Fletcher.

"You know, Dr. Fletcher, you may disagree with a man's religion, but there's no need to sneer at it."

"'All life is one,'" Fletcher mimicked. "Don't hand me that. This is no religion. Chadrapur is a fake, and a limp fake at that."

The exec bridled, flushing bright red. The lines of sweat on his face stood out like yellow paint. "Dr. Chadrapur is a great man!"

"I know. That's what all his tracts say."

"If you've read them, then you must know what he's done! He's fed the world!"

"How? By turning the Great Plains into his front lawn? By damming the Amazon? By planting the highlands of New Guinea? By raping the ocean—" Fletcher choked, surprised at his own anger, unable to go on. He himself was responsible for much—all?—of what had been done to the ocean.

"Yes!" The exec pounded the briefing room table with his fist. "All that and more!"

"That's enough," El-Ghanzouri said quietly. "I might remind Dr. Fletcher that without Dr. Chadrapur 100 billion people wouldn't be fed every day, and he should remember that, while he may not agree with them, Dr. Chadrapur's teachings bring comfort and hope to many of those 100 billion. And," she continued, turning on the angry exec, "I might remind you that Dr. Fletcher has made great contributions to that daily feeding, and that his oceanographic research led to our conquest of the sea."

And that's why I'm here. I showed them how to rape my love, and my reward is to chronicle another rape. My thirty pieces of silver.

Fletcher scowled, but did not speak. He had to credit El-Ghanzouri's even-handedness.

"Well," the exec said, "I don't think he should go."

El-Ghanzouri held up a hand to forestall Fletcher. "Why not?"

"Because it's dangerous. We don't know what diseases this man might carry."

Fletcher snorted.

"That's a point," El-Ghanzouri said. "We've had reports from Table Mountain and Dar-es-Salaam of expedition members catching plagues. They lost two factory helicopters in the South. They fell right out of the sky."

"They probably weren't careful."

"C'mon," the exec said, "give us a break! We're talking about the plagues that wiped out a continent, plagues that killed nearly 20 billion people. They are 99.9 percent communicable. These are slatewipers, Dr. Fletcher, not variations on the common cold. And this guy you want to go see is probably the patient zero who destroyed all of West Africa!"

"Which is exactly why I want to go see him," Fletcher countered. "He's probably the last of his gene pool, and before he dies I want to get his DNA on record. And I will, too, if I have to get off this damned boat and walk all the way to Yamassoukrou."

"I don't think there'll be any need for that," El-Ghanzouri said. "We'll go tomorrow, at dawn. We'll take one of the factory choppers, and a small team. Will that be all right with you, Dr. Fletcher?"

"Perfectly," he said, bowing slightly.

"Mariam, you're not going, are you?" The exec was clearly appalled by the idea.

"Yes, I am. I'd like to see the church."

EL-GHANZOURI CAME TO FLETCHER'S CABIN LATER THAT EVENING AND found him reading a book called *The Scourge of God.* She was holding a book herself.

"Is that any good?"

Fletcher laid the book carefully on his knees. "It is, if you like diseases. It's about the plagues. You can read it when I'm finished, if you like."

She grimaced.

Of course not, he thought. No one wanted to hear or read about disease. That was one thing he had to grant Chadrapur's government—

they had gone a long way toward eliminating illness altogether. They had also given people an unhealthy fear of it. He was the only member of the expedition who didn't wear a respirator, or cover his body in thick synthetics.

"I brought you this," she said, holding out the book. He took it by one corner, with a grimace much like her own.

"*All Life Is One*, by Dr. Ravi Chadrapur." He handed it back. "Thanks. I've read it."

"You have?" She was genuinely surprised.

"Let me see: 'Since all life is one, and man is but life's highest conscious form, thus it is his duty to order the world to his needs. As it was his duty in the past to order himself, now it is his duty to order all life; he is thus doing no more than ordering himself.'" He paused while she recognized the quote. "It is possible, you know, to read the words of the almighty Chadrapur and not experience an epiphany."

"I just thought—"

"That I was a cantankerous old man who was not open to new ideas?"

"Not that exactly—"

"But something close to it."

She flushed and grinned, abashed. "Yes."

Fletcher nodded complacently. "Everyone does."

She hesitated, on the verge of asking a question, and he smiled gentle encouragement.

"If you...dislike Dr. Chadrapur's teachings so much, then why did you—why did you help unify the oceans?"

Fletcher sighed heavily, steepling his fingers under his chin. "I didn't help 'unify' the oceans," he said eventually.

"But your research—"

"Was a mistake," he concluded. Forty years plumbing the depths of the blue, a life's work exploring and chronicling the wealth that covered three quarters of the earth. It was not the research that was a mistake, he knew. "I should never have published it, never let Chadrapur's people get hold of it."

El-Ghanzouri shook her head—not offended, only puzzled. "But it helped—people needed to be fed."

"Not from the ocean. Chadrapur didn't need the ocean—and he doesn't need Africa." He went on, ignoring her incipient protest. "But he had set up his religion, and had to follow it through to its logical conclusion. What's the phrase? 'Biodiversity is the myth—biouniversity is the reality.'"

"'And so we say, all life is one,'" El-Ghanzouri finished.

There was a long silence; Fletcher stared at the bulkhead.

"Tell me something," he said at last, "those reports from the south and east, about people getting the plagues—did they mention the symptoms?"

"Not to me." She looked at him strangely, confused by the change of subject.

"And they didn't mention them to you, I imagine, because they didn't notice them themselves."

"Well, no. I imagine they didn't want to expose themselves to the plague."

"What do you suppose they did—burn the crashed helicopters?"

"That's what I would do."

He thought for a moment. "Yes, I think you would."

El-Ghanzouri cocked her head for a moment at his strange tone, then told him again the hour of their departure for Yamassoukrou.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the church."

Fletcher agreed, and did not mention that he had not seen it before himself. She left him with a wish for pleasant dreams, but he did not get to sleep for some time.

THE NEXT MORNING HE DELAYED THEIR DEPARTURE FOR ALMOST AN hour. He had only slept for a short while, waking well before dawn. A premonition came upon him in those quiet hours, and he made the helicopter wait while he arranged his work.

He carefully catalogued the few remaining fauna samples that the scout choppers had brought, wrapped in hermetic bags, and updated his computer records of their DNA. Then he cleaned his cabin, and appeared on the deck of the headquarters ship.

The exec growled a good morning, and El-Ghanzouri looked pointedly at her watch.

"Sorry I'm late," he said cheerfully, slapping the exec on the back. "I was making my will. You never know what horrible disease you might catch in the wilds."

The exec growled again and ushered him onto the helicopter, stepping back to slide the door shut with a bang.

The factory helicopter rose ponderously from the deck, like an ungainly chick trying its first flight, and then, gaining power, thrust up into the air above Abidjan.

Fletcher gazed down on the placid lagoon and the ruined city, smiling on the scene. Even the expedition's ships, and the teams that he could see laying detonators, did not detract from his childish excitement.

HE KNEW THAT THE DETONATORS WERE destroying the natural ecology, sending out rippling waves of force and sound that crushed roots and obliterated insects. He knew that the ships would soon disperse, as the tamed area spread, heading east and west along the coast to land at other spots and continue the process. He knew that factory helicopters like the one he rode on were ranging far and wide, collecting and butchering the animals they found, sterilizing and processing them into edible protein. And he knew that soon enough other ships would come, bringing genetically engineered worms and bugs to render the dead soil amenable to alien crops.

Fletcher knew this, but he still could not contain his excitement. This, perhaps, was why he had come to Africa—not to catalogue the few animals the factory ships left him, to preserve their DNA codes like so many electronic headstones, but to explore, to experience the last possible adventure in a world rendered dull and lifeless by the necessity of feeding 100 billion people.

Looking around the passenger compartment of the helicopter, he knew the others did not share his excitement, and that only heightened it.

They don't know what they're missing, he thought, and chuckled to himself.

"Have you been to Africa much, Dr. Fletcher?" El-Ghanzouri asked.

"Many times, but not ever for very long. Mostly brief stops while at sea." He remembered some of them—barbecues on deserted beaches while his research ship waited at anchor, visits to ports that hadn't seen a ship in decades—and one in particular, a stop in Abidjan. His French had not been good, and that of the locals had long since degenerated into dialect. He had not fully understood what the woman was proposing, but accepted anyway.

"There was a time in Abidjan," he began, and then stopped. He could not tell El-Ghanzouri that. It would shock her, but with the enhanced memory that is sometimes all that is left to old men, he thought back to the embrace of the woman, and the smell of their sweat.

"In Abidjan?"

The woman had used her finger while they made love, but he put the memory carefully away, unwilling to pursue it in the crowded helicopter.

"Yes, before it was nerve-gassed in the Pan-African War."

"Oh."

El-Ghanzouri would have been a toddler then, he reflected, and her Dr. Chadrapur had just started the ecological pacification of India. Fletcher sighed heavily.

Africa flashed past beneath them, grass browning in the sun, long, eroded hillsides of red clay like fresh wounds. The smell in the helicopter was rich and thick, a heady scent that he drew into his nostrils. It was completely different from the smell of the sea, more complex, dirtier, but he liked it. It was confusion and growth and death.

He noticed that some of El-Ghanzouri's squad were breathing through their mouths, and chuckled again to himself.

AFTER AN HOUR, THE HELICOPTER SUDDENLY LURCHED HEAVILY, throwing Fletcher to the floor.

They settled down in a field of high grass, and as the rotors slowed, the sound of the grass rustling against the helicopter's metal skin penetrated the passenger compartment.

"What is it?" El-Ghanzouri demanded, helping Fletcher back to his seat.

"Something in the intakes," the pilot explained over his shoulder. "I think it's a bird."

"Is it a problem?"

"It just needs to be removed," the pilot said, turning his head to her. His tongue played nervously over his lips.

"Well? Remove it!"

He mumbled something and released his harness, but did not get up.

"Jesus," Fletcher said, "I'll do it. Where's the intake?"

"No," El-Ghanzouri objected, "let the pilot do it."

"Why? He's scared to go out there, and I'm not."

The pilot blushed furiously and began to rise.

"Besides," Fletcher continued, "I've been to Africa. I've been exposed to all this stuff before." *And I'm old,* he thought, but did not add.

"All right," El-Ghanzouri said reluctantly, "but put on a respirator, and gloves too."

Fletcher submitted to the heavy gear, and even waited patiently while the crew pressed away from the door. He slid it open just wide enough to slip out, then closed it quickly.

For a moment he just stood in the waist-high grass, enjoying the feeling of it pressing against his legs, the play of the wind. The rotors overhead made one last, lazy sweep, and were still.

They don't know what they're missing. I should have made them come out.

Even through the respirator he could smell the earth, and the sun was sweet on his face. With a smile he walked around the helicopter to find the intake.

It was at the rear of the helicopter, almost ten yards from the door. There was a broad splash of blood around the opening, and inside he could see the crushed carcass of a bird.

He pulled it out quickly, his hands slippery in the heavy gloves. The bird had been mangled beyond recognition by the foils around the intake, but it was relatively whole. Nothing remained in the machinery.

For a moment he stood staring at the corpse, musing silently. Then he saw the mites crawling through the remains, and dropped it.

Before climbing into the helicopter, he shucked his gloves, and when he was aboard, he excused himself and went to the bathroom. He ran the water until it was near-boiling, and held his hands under the faucet for as long as he could.

That was one of the times he thought he came to Africa to die.

THEY REACHED YAMASSOUKROU NEAR DUSK. THE PILOT CIRCLED, TRYing to find a place to land.

"There," Fletcher called, pointing out a broad expanse of white stone in front of an ivy-covered hill.

El-Ghanzouri joined him at the window as the pilot brought the helicopter down. "What is it?"

"It's the church," Fletcher answered. "The plaza before it, really. The church is under all that green."

She breathed her wonder softly. "It looks like a hill."

"The biggest basilica in the world, once. Three hundred years ago."

They both fell silent as the hill grew bigger, and then they came to rest.

The concrete of the plaza was cracked and pitted, with weeds struggling up here and there, but El-Ghanzouri's squad jumped out of the helicopter with little evident hesitation. Stone could conceal no lurking dangers.

It was only when she ordered them to plant detonators that they wavered. That meant approaching the edges of the plaza, where the grass grew high and thick. They moved slowly, carrying the long sticks of the detonators before them like charms.

Fletcher called El-Ghanzouri over to where he stood, at the foot of the hill. A crescent of pillars stood between the plaza and the ivy-covered dome of the church, a monstrous, age-pitted guard.

"Do you want to go in?"

"Now? It's almost dark."

The sun was a bloated orange ball on the horizon. They heard the crump of a detonator from the south end of the plaza.

"In the morning we'll be looking for the man," he warned.

Two other detonators went off, to the east and west.

"We'll look first thing, then go."

"All right."

He was excited, more excited even than he had been earlier. The church really did look like a hill, a steep and regular hill, and the thought that beneath that covering lay an ancient temple brought out a childish glee.

With the detonators used, the life of the land for almost a mile in every direction destroyed, and the perimeter of the plaza strung with sonic insect repellers, the crew of the helicopter felt safer. They built a fire, far enough from their ship for safety, but still far from the edge of the concrete. They ate their meal under the stars.

Fletcher ate with them, but did not listen to their conversation. He heard the wind soughing through the dying grasses, playing in the leaves of baobabs whose roots had been crushed by sound.

They'll plant peach trees here, he imagined, *or something they've genetically engineered to grow big and produce the most food.*

This, though, was not his fault. He had led them to the oceans, with his analysis of their potential, but they had found Africa all by themselves, and would remake it in their own image.

A weight still settled on his chest, though. He recalled the data he had left on the ship in Abidjan, the DNA roster of species soon to be extinct.

I'm Africa's undertaker.

THE CO-PILOT OF THE HELICOPTER AND ONE OF El-Ghanzouri's squad threw up their meals later in the night, but it was attributed to the unusual diet. Members of the expedition were allotted extra amounts of the sterilized food culled by the factory helicopters—and they were not used to so much protein.

Fletcher rolled over in his sleeping bag, listening to the talk made around the sick men. He thought of the mangled bird he had held. *Africa's undertaker.*

THEY DID NOT HAVE TO SEARCH FOR THE MAN THE NEXT MORNING; he came to them, a scarecrow, nightmare vision stumbling through the grasses.

Fletcher had woken El-Ghanzouri just after dawn, and they went into the church alone.

There was a covered porch in front of the door, over which ivy hung like a green waterfall. Fletcher was going to push the growth away, but she gestured him to one side and produced a small flamethrower. It looked absurdly like a child's water pistol, and he wanted to laugh, but then she burned away a section of ivy, and he stopped smiling.

She led him in.

It was cool inside the church, and dim. A little light filtered through the ivy sheath, and then through the enormous stained glass windows. It reminded Fletcher of light in the depths of the ocean, wavery and almost solid. They stepped gingerly over marble floors slick with mold, making the circuit of the dome until they stood behind the dais where the altar once was.

They both looked up at the roof of the basilica, lost in shadows.

"All life is one," El-Ghanzouri prayed, her mouth slack with awe. She shuddered suddenly, as if chilled, and wrapped her

arms around herself.

"Ora pro nobis," Fletcher whispered.

She turned to him, startled. "Are you a Catholic?"

He shook his head. "How are Jackson and Chiang?" He named the two men who had been sick the night before.

"I don't know. I didn't check. Why?"

He shook his head again, and looked back up at the ceiling.

There was gunfire from the plaza.

El-Ghanzouri started running at once, but Fletcher paused and then knelt. He crossed himself, unsure if he was doing it correctly, and then jogged after her.

THE MAN HAD COME FROM THE SOUTH, PLUNGing wildly through the grass, moaning and muttering as he came. The two men on guard did not notice him until he was less than thirty yards from the plaza. They shouted to him not to come any closer, then waved their guns at him. He came on, waving his arms weakly. They were like sticks, and his shirtsleeves flapped like banners.

The guards backed away, still shouting, rousing the rest of the squad, except for the two men who lay in their sleeping bags and would not move.

When the man reached the edge of the plaza, the guards fired.

El-Ghanzouri stopped running by the helicopter, drawing a ragged breath. Fletcher caught up with her there, stumbling to a stop for a moment and then running on. One of the guards held up a hand to try and stop him.

"Sir," the young man said, enunciating the word with some difficulty. He was pale, and wobbled slightly. Fletcher snarled and shoved passed him, running to the dead man. The guard wobbled more, then toppled.

Fletcher knelt by the corpse at the edge of the plaza, feeling for a pulse in the pipe-cleaner neck. His hand came away sticky with blood. He cursed, and heard the footsteps behind him.

"I wanted him alive," he shouted.

"Burn him." It was El-Ghanzouri. "He's got a plague. Burn him."

Fletcher looked at the thin, wasted body. There were mottled lesions on the face and chest. "No! He was going to church and he was starving!"

"Burn him."

He turned, something in her tone sending a chill through him.

She was standing ten feet away, her flamethrower aimed at both him and the corpse.

"If you don't, I will."

She stooped and laid the flamethrower on the ground, then turned and walked back to the helicopter. He stood up and trotted after her, pleading.

"Let me take a sample of his DNA."

She did not answer. She stalked to the helicopter, gesturing to the squad as she went.

"Get aboard. Everyone aboard."

"Just let me get the sample," Fletcher begged.

The men backed away from her; one hesitated by the guard Fletcher had knocked over. He had not moved since falling.

"Leave him," she said woodenly. "He's got a plague. And Jackson and Chiang as well. Get on board."

Fletcher froze when he saw the guard.

Is that my fault, too?

The men jumped into the helicopter, their faces drawn and apprehensive. El-Ghanzouri stepped to the door.

"Give me another flamethrower."

No one responded and she snarled the order again, with a curse they had never heard her use before. Her eyes were fever-bright and moist. Someone handed her a flamethrower and she turned to the guard sprawled on the concrete.

Fletcher skipped back a step or two as the man was enveloped in flame.

"Jesus, Mariam, what are you doing?"

"They've got a plague," she said over her shoulder, as she walked to where Jackson and Chiang lay stuporous in their sleeping bags. She turned the flamethrower on them for a few seconds.

The stink of charred flesh rose in the air. One of the men in the helicopter began to gag, another to speak, and El-Ghanzouri's head jerked up. She looked at the man who was gagging, then ran her eyes over the whole helicopter, as if it were some strange animal that had just crawled from the depths of the jungle.

"Go burn the man," she ordered Fletcher. He backed up a step, but did not turn from her, trying to give voice to his horror.

"Don't."

She turned the flamethrower on the door of the helicopter, engulfing the waiting squad. The flames roared, lapping up the synthetic of their biosuits. They began to scream, and Fletcher saw the muscles of El-Ghanzouri's neck knot up. Tears streamed down her pale face. She walked away from the burning helicopter.

"Oh Jesus," Fletcher wailed.

"Don't worry," she said tonelessly, "the ship won't blow up. The fuel tanks are sealed off from the compartment."

"Mariam," he began.

"Will you burn the man, or should I?"

He was crying now himself. Shuffling awkwardly, he stumbled back to the southern edge of the plaza. He scooped up the flamethrower she had laid down and tried, blindly, to find the trigger. He could not find it through his tears.

Oh God, is this why I came to Africa?

He had still not found the trigger when he heard her calling. She was struggling with a gun, the one the guard had dropped.

"Dr. Fletcher, I need your help."

She was trying to put the muzzle under her chin and reach the trigger. Her arms were too short.

He ran up and snatched the gun from her.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"You understand," she pled. "We couldn't go back to Abidjan. Jackson and Chiang—they were sick. They had a plague. You knew that. We couldn't bring that back. We couldn't do that. Think of all the people who would die." She knelt before him. "Will you do this for me?"

Looking down at her, at her paling face with the two rose-bright blushes of fever on her cheeks, he wanted to shout, to rage, but he could not muster the anger.

"We can live," he said, though he knew it was not true. The exec would not allow that.

"Please, Dr. Fletcher." Her eyes grew clear for a moment. "Do this for me."

He looked down at his hands, at the gun and the flamethrower. He dropped the flamethrower and raised the gun to his shoulder.

El-Ghanzouri closed her eyes. "All life is one," she breathed, and he snarled as he fired.

For a long time he wandered around the plaza. The fire in the helicopter died out, after consuming the passenger compartment and the cockpit. He could not have taken a sample from the dead man if he had wanted to. His equipment was gone to ash, as was the radio.

Not that I'd use it, he thought. *Let them come looking. Let them fly down here and look.*

Fletcher shuffled, an old man, mumbling and muttering. He stared at the corpses without seeing them, and it was finally the thought of buzzards that brought him back.

There were none.

His mind cleared a little as he searched the sky. There should have been buzzards, but there were none. Nonetheless, there were other things to come from the sky.

Let them come looking—I won't be here.

Dropping the gun, he walked to the edge of the plaza, where the grass began. He felt older than he ever had, older than he was, older than time.

"All life is one," he said and, laughing harshly, stepped into the waist-high grass. He felt it enfold him, brush lovingly against his thighs and calves.

This is why I came to Africa. □

THE OGRE'S WIFE

BY RICHARD PARKS
Illustration by Stephen T. Johnson

Marybeth's monstrous husband was a vengeful trickster, and her only hope for survival was to go him one trick better.

ON THE DAY AFTER HER SEVENTEENTH birthday, Marybeth's father gave her in marriage to an ogre. Her father had his reasons.

"The Council agreed it was the only way," he said.

Marybeth felt her heart sink in regret. She considered herself no great beauty; her complexion was darker than most due to her mother's Southern blood, which also gave her brown eyes and a slightly hawkish nose. Still, her skin was clear, she had all her teeth, and her hair was thick and black and fell in long sinuous waves to her shoulders. She'd hoped to do better.

"The only way to do what?" asked Marybeth's mother. "Cheat us of the bride price?" She loved her daughter dearly, make no mistake, but she was a practical woman and knew this day would have come

"Drink this," he said. "It'
you ill, there would be no su

sooner or later, with or without an ogre attached to it.

"The only way to get rid of the ogre," Marybeth's father said wearily. "Those men with eligible daughters drew lots. I lost. It was fairly done."

The village of Tumby had known the ravages of the beast for nearly three years. At first the losses were confined to sheep and the occasional ox, but within the past month, three outlying farmhouses had been raided and their furnishings ransacked and pilfered. One farmer who went off alone to seek revenge had not been seen since. The village mustered what men and weapons it could and sought the beast on several occasions, and on all those occasions the villagers had come home hungry and tired, without even catching a glimpse of their quarry.

"What of the Earl?" asked Marybeth's mother. "Are we not entitled to protection?" It sounded more like a complaint than hope.

Marybeth's father had a look of exaggerated patience. "The Earl is away in the King's service, and most of his men with him. Those that remain are guarding his own holdings. We'll get no help from him."

"How do you know that?"

"The ogre told us. I tend to believe him, Wife."

After a bit more prodding, the whole story came out: the ogre had appeared, pretty as you please and almost as polite, at the monthly meeting of the Tumby Council.

"By now you know you cannot catch me," the ogre had said, pausing to swat a foolhardy youth who approached him with a kitchen knife. "If I did allow you to find me, I swear you'd regret it. So I have an alternative: give me a pleasing maiden from among you to be wife to me and I will spare your village. Deny me and the weeds will grow over your bones."

"What did he look like?" asked Marybeth, not very hopefully.

Marybeth's father obviously considered the question foolish. "Like an ogre," he said. "Over two ells tall, tusks like a boar, bristly hair. Well-spoken, for all that."

"Perhaps he's enchanted," said Marybeth's mother, though she didn't sound convinced or convincing.

Her father shrugged. "There's some magic about him, right enough. He's an ogre. But I'll not send my daughter to her new husband bearing unreasonable expectations. That's no way to start a marriage."

Marybeth's father gave his wife a meaningful look, and she merely lowered her eyes and said nothing. So it was decided. Marybeth went to pack her belongings while her parents once more did not speak their minds to each other.

THE OGRE'S DIRECTIONS HADN'T BEEN VERY specific. Marybeth was to walk out on the main road until she reached the Burling River, then turn left at the bridge. She came to the bridge after walking for an hour or so, her clothes in a bundle on her back, her orange and black calico kitten, Lissie, riding on her shoulder. Marybeth walked into the forest bordering the river on the left. She walked until the farmland near the road was behind her and there was nothing but trees surrounding her and the first few peaks of the hill country in the distance. The forest was quiet except for the crunch of leaves under her feet and the occasional birdsong.

"I suppose," Marybeth said to Lissie, "that he'll find me when he's ready."

"You suppose correctly," the ogre said, just before he ate her kitten.

Marybeth had no warning. One moment he was not there, the next moment he was. The opposite was true for poor Lissie. Marybeth's mouth moved up and down as if she was trying to speak, but no sound came out for a long time. She finally managed to scream.

"Lissie!"

The ogre frowned. He was every bit as ugly as her father had described, and the frown didn't help. Marybeth wanted to be terrified, knew she damn well *should* be terrified, but she could only manage one emotion at a time, and right now anger would not share the stage with anything.

"You monster!" Marybeth beat her fists against the ogre's barn door of a chest, tears of rage welling in her eyes.

"Yes," he said. "I'm an ogre. Did your father not explain that to you?"

"You ate Lissie!"

"The furling? I assumed it was a present for your new husband, and very thoughtful at that since I *was* feeling peckish. Was I in error?"

Marybeth blinked through her tears. He certainly looked like an ogre, and *acted* like an ogre, but he didn't sound like one, or at least what she'd expected. "She was my dear Lissie...you ate her!"

The ogre put his hands on his hips and stepped close, plainly irritated. Marybeth had to look almost straight up at him. "Don't go on about it, girl! I could have eaten *you*," he pointed out. "And I might yet. I trust I won't have to remind you of this in future. Follow me, Wife."

It didn't sound like a request. Marybeth fought her tears and followed her husband. It wasn't as if she had a choice. "I am Marybeth," she said, sullen. "What shall I call you...er, ogre?"

"'Husband' will do. Or 'ogre.' Both are what I am, though perhaps ogre is closer to the mark."

Marybeth needed no reminding, but there it was. Her husband wasn't an enchanted prince or enchanted anything—he was what he was.

"Ogre it is," she said.

MARYBETH WAS A COUNTRY GIRL AND NOT VERY SHELTERED. SHE KNEW what normally passed between a husband and wife. But she was married to an ogre, and from the time she'd understood that fact, she'd wondered what an ogre would want with a human girl, other than a meal. When they reached his lair in a rocky cave near the river, Marybeth finally thought she understood.

"You want me to clean this?" she said, staring in disbelief.

The ogre's home was more like the den of an animal, only not so tidy. It wasn't a true cave, Marybeth realized. More likely it had been carved out of living rock by the ogre himself. There was an ogre-sized chair and bed, and a hearth, and cupboards, but there were also pieces of trees and broken stone lying about, and bones piled in the corner in heaps. The smell wasn't too bad, more like old earth with a hint of compost than real decay, but the rest was almost beyond belief.

"Why, what's wrong with it?" he asked. "It's comfortable."

"It's filthy. I can't live like this," Marybeth said.

"Then I suppose you'll have to clean it, unless you want me to eat you instead? I'm still hungry."

s not poison. If I wished btlety about it. Do as I say."

"I'll clean it," she said. "So if I am to live, you'll have to eat something else."

"I'd best catch it then. I wouldn't try to leave, if I were you. Even if you could." He stepped out through the entranceway and locked the huge door behind him. Marybeth heard his massive footfalls fading in the distance. She looked around, sighed gustily, and got to work.

Marybeth was a little surprised to find a working broom. It was very old, but serviceable. She rearranged the bones and swept out the hearth, arranging the dust in a mound by the bones since she had no way to sweep it out. Soon she had a sizable fire going, which burned off a little of the dampness. She paused long enough to make herself a cup of tea with some of the brownbush leaves her mother had given her in parting, then went back to work. She was trying to straighten out one of the shelves in a huge alcove when memories of Lissie suddenly returned and overwhelmed her.

"My poor dear kitty..."

"Mew?"

The sound was muffled but close by. Marybeth traced it to a lower shelf and a small earthen crock. She lifted the lid with trembling fingers and peered inside. An orange and black kitten sat blinking in the weak light. It was Lissie. There wasn't a doubt in Marybeth's mind, even before she noticed the scarred right ear where one of her father's hounds had snapped at the kitten just a week before.

"Mew!"

Marybeth held her up and looked into the kitten's too familiar face. "I saw the ogre eat you, Lissie."

The kitten was not impressed, though she was clearly glad to be out of the jar. But why was she alive, and how did she get in the jar in the first place? The ogre hadn't been out of her sight before he left the den. Yet here Lissie was, good as new. At that point Marybeth didn't care. She hugged the kitten close and cried for joy.

I'M BACK," THE OGRE ANNOUNCED.

Marybeth wasn't sure how many hours had passed. The ogre had a young ox draped across his shoulders. Its throat had been torn out and the carcass had apparently bled dry; at least it wasn't dripping where she'd swept.

The ogre looked about with mild interest. "Somewhat different. Not greatly so."

"I couldn't lift the stones or the tree-trunks," Marybeth said, "or sweep out properly with the door shut. I did the best I could." She held Lissie close in her arms.

The ogre glanced at the kitten. "I thought I felt my stomach twitch. You must have found Dara's Cauldron."

"I found Lissie in a crockery jar," Marybeth said. "How—how did she get there?"

"You put her there," he said, dropping the ox on the floor. "The cauldron tries to give you what you desire most. That's its nature. I gather you wanted this little fleabag back."

"Yes," she said.

"It's a good thing you didn't wish for your freedom, then," he said. "Freedom cannot be contained in a crockery jar. That's *its* nature. Though the poor cauldron might have split itself trying. Here, you must be hungry too." He tore off a haunch and handed it to Marybeth.

"I can't eat this," she said. "It's raw."

"Then I guess you'd better cook it," the ogre said, in a tone that made it clear it was all the same to him.

Marybeth went to work at the hearth. She was annoyed but she couldn't say why. What he'd said was simple sense, if a little callous. Still, after witnessing his first meeting with Lissie, Marybeth didn't suppose the ogre normally bothered to cook his meat. She glanced back at him but got no hint. The ox lay where he'd dropped it, and he'd settled into his great chair, watching her. At least he hadn't set his attention on Lissie again. Marybeth found a knife and skinned the haunch, then prepared the meat as best she could with what few herbs she could find and roasted it.

The ogre broke the silence first. "How is it?"

Marybeth was startled. The ogre had sat unmoving during her preparations and the time it had taken to cook the meat. She had cleared herself a place on a bench and taken a few bites when he'd finally spoken; she'd almost forgotten he was there.

"Well enough," she said, and her manners pressed her to continue, "Would you like to try it?"

"It always seemed a strange practice to me, but I'll admit to some curiosity. Yes, I will try it."

He took the bone she offered, which had far more meat on it than she'd be able to eat in several days, and sucked it in like a child eating a cherry. In a moment the pit of a bone went sailing across the room to land in Marybeth's now almost-clean corner.

"Interesting," he said, looking thoughtful. "I don't suppose you could prepare the rest of it like that?"

"Not quickly," Marybeth said, eyeing the mass of flesh. "And not without help."

That didn't work out too well. For all the strength required in properly butchering an ox, there was also a great deal of precision needed, and the ogre wasn't very good at precision when he wasn't eating kittens. Marybeth, for her part, didn't fare too well moving a fifty-stone carcass on her own.

The ogre seemed to consider. "I have something that may help," he said. He went into the alcove and returned with a small stoppered bottle. "Drink this," he said. Then he continued, apparently noticing the look she gave him, "It's not poison. If I wished you ill, there would be no subtlety about it. Do as I say."

Marybeth shrugged and drank the potion. It was bitter and smelled faintly of garlic. She felt a slight tingling all over her skin, as if she were covered with thousands of ants running in all different directions at once. She shivered, but the feeling passed quickly.

"Now tend to the ox," her husband said.

Marybeth shrugged again and took hold of a foreleg. She tugged once and the carcass was suddenly three feet closer to the hearth. She hadn't felt the least bit of effort. It was like moving a leaf.

"I think you'll find that strength is a useful virtue in an ogre's wife," he said.

Much later, when the bones were clean stripped and piled in the corner, the ogre lay down in his massive bed and went to sleep. He didn't snore much, and for that Marybeth was grateful. He hadn't touched her, and Marybeth was even more grateful for that. It wasn't just that he was repulsive—though he was certainly that—but she'd gotten a glimpse of his naked body when he'd stripped for bed, and the only thing she could think was that if the ogre ever came to her as a man to a woman, she would die. And there were certainly less painful ways to end a life.

Maybe I'll have Dara's Crock make me some poison. Just in case.

A beautiful woman appe
pool, just her head and nec

For now, she and Lissie found an unused corner of the bed and went to sleep.

THE OGRE'S DEN MIGHT HAVE BEEN MADE TO ORDER, BUT IT CONNECTED to natural caves in the back, closer to the Burling River. They were lit with a faint glow from the walls, but Marybeth was reluctant to enter them until Lissie, exploring every almost-cranny and near-nook of her new home, found them and scampered off into the twilight.

"Lissie, come back here!"

Lissie, of course, did no such thing, and finally Marybeth followed down to retrieve the wayward kitten. The descent was steep at first, but then the incline relented, and Marybeth found herself in a great open cavern. She could hear the flow of the river beyond the far wall, but here it seeped partway into the cavern, forming a quiet pool. It was a lovely place but large and echoing, and it reminded Marybeth too much of being alone.

She picked up the kitten. "I wish I had someone besides you to talk to, Lissie. But I can't imagine who would fit in that silly little jar—"

"Hello."

The sound didn't come from the cauldron this time. A beautiful woman appeared in the center of the pool, just her head and neck showing above the water. She had hair even blacker than Marybeth's, and large, dark eyes. "You're the ogre's wife," the woman said. "We heard he'd married a human, and we were curious."

"I'm Marybeth."

The woman bowed her head slightly in greeting. "We are Merrow. Our folk are of the sea, but a few of us live in the river now."

Marybeth had heard stories of the river maidens, but she'd never seen one. Though the rumor was that you *didn't* see one and live to tell of it. Marybeth's new-found strength was a comfort then, but she kept her distance. "'We?' Is your name not Merrow?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders, sending ripples across the pool. "We are *all* Merrow, my sisters and I. It is our nature."

"My husband just calls himself ogre. That's his nature, I guess."

The woman smiled. "Of course." She eyed Marybeth critically. "You are pretty but not overly well-favored."

"Are all Merrow so rude?" Marybeth asked in astonishment.

The woman showed mild surprise. "Is it rude to tell the truth? I'm sorry, but the ways of humans are strange to us."

"This is all strange to me as well, but I see you meant no offense. So let me ask you—is it so odd for an ogre to marry a human, especially a plain one?"

Merrow shrugged. "Plain or lovely, it's all the same to an ogre, by comparison. And no, it happens all the time."

"Why?" It was a question Marybeth had been asking herself for some time now. The ogre seemed to like her cooking well enough, but it didn't seem overly important to him. Nor did her housekeeping. Nothing about her seemed to matter much to her husband. His indifference was beginning to annoy her, and she didn't know the 'why' of that either.

"Perhaps you should ask him," Merrow said.

The thought had occurred to her, but Marybeth decided not to act on it just yet. Her annoyance still had a way to go before it overtook her fear, and the answer she got from her husband might not be one she could live with—for long. For the moment, it was nice to have someone to talk to. Marybeth decided to take a different sort of chance.

"Merrow, would you like a cup of tea?"

The woman smiled. "Yes. That would be lovely."

There was a brief roil of water around Merrow, and for an instant Marybeth was certain she saw the edge of a fin at the surface. But, when she came out of the pool with a white muslin gown clinging wet to her body, Merrow walked on two human legs.

Later, with the tea brewing and the conversation going by turns fascinating and frightening, Marybeth dared ask another question. "How did you change to human form? I'm sure you don't go on two legs in the water."

Merrow smiled. "One advantage of knowing your true nature is that it's easy to change your appearance and form. It doesn't change what you are, and your true self is never fooled. It's nothing. All those Not Born of Eve have the trick. Humans only develop the knack with great difficulty."

"Why is that?"

"Because your own true nature is a mystery to you. You cloud it with myths and stories, and you make up lies about what it means to be human. You want to be so many things that you are never sure what it is you *are*. A body so filled with uncertainty cannot change itself for fear of never finding its own form again."

"You're a myth," Marybeth said. "Or legend, or story, to some people."

"To some people, but never to ourselves. I am a Merrow. Your husband is an ogre. All my sisters and I know what that means, and so does he. When you say, 'I am human,' what does it really mean to you?"

Marybeth poured the tea. "I don't know," she said. "I'd like to."

Merrow held up one of the golden cups Marybeth had managed to scrounge from the former debris of the den. "My own service is of mother-of-pearl and silver. Let me show it to you someday."

IT TOOK A WEEK OR MORE TO GATHER HER COURAGE, but Marybeth finally did ask the ogre why he had sought a human wife. "Because it was time," he said, and that was all he would say on the matter, though Marybeth did prod him as much as she dared. She finally gave up.

The days and weeks that followed fell into a predictable pattern. The ogre would rise in the morning and go out and about an ogre's business, locking the great door behind him. Marybeth, more out of something to do than any real desire, kept house. With her new strength, Marybeth had no trouble turning the den into something approaching a home. The shelves were set to rights and dusted, the floors swept clean. Even with all this to occupy her, Marybeth found herself alone and idle for much of the day. Lissie's company made it easier to bear, and Merrow would come now and again for tea and conversation, but even these good visits weren't enough.

One day Marybeth confronted the ogre husband with this. "I'll go mad cooped up here," she finished. "My housekeeping skills would suffer."

The ogre looked around at his now orderly den. "I will admit I've stubbed my toes far less often since you've arrived, and I've gotten used to having you and your furling underfoot. But this is where I live and this is what I am and there's no changing either. What would you suggest?"

"At least let me go into the woods to gather herbs and berries. It'll be a change for me and no burden to you. I might even find some

ared in the center of the
k showing above the water.

wild mushrooms to go with your beef. I'll not run away."

"Very well, then, but see that you don't," he said. "Or your entire village will suffer for it. You being wife to me may be a whim, but it is *my* whim and I will satisfy it."

Her husband was as good as his word. The next morning the ogre left the door unlocked when he set out from the den. The massive door still took effort to move, even with Marybeth's new-found strength, though the ogre had opened it with ease. That understanding banished any thoughts Marybeth may have had of using her new fortitude to overpower him. She settled for taking a reed basket from its hook and stepping back out, for a while, into the world.

The world was not the same.

Marybeth stood for some time, blinking in the morning sunlight and trying to decide what the difference was. Lissie, still kittenish but growing fast, stalked imaginary mice in the weeds by the doorway.

"Do you notice it, Lissie?"

Lissie glanced at her, yawned hugely, and went back to the phantom mice. Marybeth looked back at the forest, trying to turn her certainty into words. Nothing really looked different: the trees, the river, the sky all looked as she remembered. She was glad to see them all, after her time in the den, but it wasn't simple gratitude. The forest and the river and even the sky seemed to have a glow about it, as if anything could happen there. As if what up until now had seemed so changeless was suddenly full of possibility.

That was before I met the ogre. And Merrow. There is so much more to the world than I thought there was.

Before the ogre came, her life had spread out before her like a story she'd heard too many times before. Familiar, even pleasant, but not such a great or wondrous thing. Instead, here she was, barely seventeen and married to an actual ogre rather than a man who might just have the manners of one. Marybeth thought of what being an ogre's wife had meant so far: she had a decent home that she even thought of as hers now that her work had made it so. It was carved into a hill but was not so very different from the masonry and thatch houses of Tumby. The ogre provided well, and Marybeth was not mistreated. She didn't even lack for company. Marybeth wondered how very different her life would be with a human husband. She only knew of one thing for certain, and at this point in Marybeth's life, that particular subject had more to do with idle dreaming and fancy than anything real. Not so much a regret as a matter of curiosity, of myth-making and what-if.

Say what you will, girl. Merrow spoke the truth of that.

By the time Lissie tired of hunting and curled up to nap in the sun, Marybeth had found some wild onions growing in the clearing by the hill; she pulled a few and rinsed the shoots clean in the river before walking deeper into the woods. She traveled some distance in her search for mushrooms, but she always kept the crest of the hill by the river in sight. Marybeth had just finished harvesting a particularly large patch of plump mushrooms near the edge of a clearing when she heard voices. Well aware of the sort of people she might meet in the forest, Marybeth decided to hide herself behind a bramble bush. She took her basket and crouched down, out of sight.

My heavens...

At some point music was added to the murmur, music so ethereally beautiful that Marybeth's eyes grew misty at the sound. Then, two by two, the most splendid folk Marybeth had ever seen emerged from one side of the clearing and neatly progressed to the other. They were dressed in all the colors of the rainbow in gowns of gossamer and tunics of linen fine as spider web. Their faces had a lean angularity about them that was at once inhuman and strikingly beautiful. They walked in pairs, each lord to his lady, while invisible minstrels played the pavane. Marybeth watched them pass, each couple strengthening an odd sensation Marybeth felt in the pit of her stomach, a feeling that she could not put a name to, like a pain and a longing all mixed up together. She watched until the last couple passed her by, unable to speak even if she'd wished to.

The last to emerge from the woods came out alone. He was dressed like the others; he even looked like them. He was tall, well-formed, and handsome, with long fair hair and sky-blue eyes. But there was a difference. There had been something missing from the others, despite their beauty. A coldness in the eyes, a hauteur in their bearing that spoke of time and distance and separation from all that Marybeth was or ever would be. There was none of that in the man walking slowly across the clearing now; no hauteur, no ice. There was a smile on his lips and a merry gleam in his eye, and there was something about him that seemed almost familiar, though Marybeth could not name it. Just before he vanished into the trees with the others, the man turned and looked directly at the bush where Marybeth hid.

"A lovely game of Hide and Seek, Maiden. Thank you. But will you find *me* as easily?"

Then he was gone.

THEY WERE THE LORDS AND LADIES OF THE *Sidhe*, of course," Merrow said from the pool. She had answered as she usually did when Marybeth rapped on the stalagmite that spired out of the edge of the pool, but this time she would not stay. There was Merrow business afoot that evening, it seemed. "I don't know of the lord you mentioned; I've not seen him before. Why do you ask?"

"He saw me," Marybeth said. "He spoke to me. I wondered if there was cause for concern."

Merrow looked grim. "There is always cause for concern when the Sidhe are near. Be careful, Marybeth. You live among the Not Born of Eve under your husband's protection, but there are powers in the wood much greater than his."

That was worth knowing. Marybeth thanked Merrow for her advice and watched her slip away under the water. Up above, the great door had opened and the ogre was calling for her.

"Coming, Husband," she said and hurried up to the den. The ogre had brought home venison this time, a good change. Marybeth prepared the food and they ate together. The ogre spoke little even for him, which she didn't mind now. Marybeth didn't feel much like talking. Her mind kept going back to the handsome lord with the sky-blue eyes. Later, when the ogre and Lissie were both asleep, she sought out Dara's Cauldron.

Its appearance hadn't changed but, with practice, Marybeth had learned to see the magic in it, even peer beyond the surface to get a glimpse of its true form, just as she recognized the aura of power surrounding several other innocuous-seeming items on the ogre's shelves. He'd managed to accumulate much that was both strange and wonderful during his predations, but now it was Dara's Cauldron she sought.

Marybeth had finally deci

want poison after all. But now th

It had been some time since Marybeth had asked the cauldron to make something for her. She'd tried for poison, soon after her arrival, but all the cauldron would do was produce something like stinkberry jam. Marybeth had finally decided that she didn't really want poison after all. But now there was something she did want, and the cauldron created it immediately—a shiny new mirror. There was even a comb to match, and a red ribbon and pins for her hair. Marybeth hadn't thought to ask for those, but the cauldron made them for her just the same.

It seemed inordinately pleased with itself.

FINDING THE SIDHE LORD TURNED OUT TO be easier than Marybeth had expected. She didn't even think of herself as looking for him, but the next day, at about the same time, she found herself on the edge of the same clearing, standing by a fairy ring of toadstools. These she did not pick, of course. She knew better. When the voices and the music came again, she ducked back behind the same bramble bush and waited for the fairy pavane to pass by her. Again the single lord of the Sidhe followed the dancers, and again he paused for her.

"Have you found me, Fair One?"

Marybeth stood up, though her knees were trembling just the slightest bit. "So it would appear."

"I am called Blackbone," he said, "and I love you."

Marybeth didn't know what she had meant to say or do. Her emotions were not clear where the Sidhe lord was concerned. But hearing his name made a difference. It was like a slap of cold water after a long sleep. After a moment she even knew why. She smiled at him, but she kept her distance.

"I am Marybeth," she said. "The ogre's wife."

Blackbone frowned. To Marybeth it looked like a gathering storm, splendid and terrifying. "What is that to me?" he asked. "Or to you? The ogre is taciturn and brooding. He has no understanding or appreciation of what he has in you, no skills to tend either your heart or your sweet flesh's garden. He is no fit mate for a human girl; I am no mortal, but I could be much more to you than he. Speak your heart and it will be given thee, if it is myself to be given."

"I am honored," Marybeth said, "but I am still myself pondering what it means to be the ogre's wife, and I do not yet know my heart. May I have leave to think on what you offer me?"

"Very well, but do not dally, Marybeth. My flesh is eternal but my patience is not. That is my nature, and I fear there is no changing it."

"Whatever I would ask, I would not ask that."

Marybeth was no lady of the court, but she managed a passable curtsy. In a moment she was alone again in the woods.

THAT EVENING WHEN THE OGRE RETURNED HE ASKED HER HOW HER gathering had gone because, Marybeth was certain, the onions and mushrooms she'd used to flavor the venison the night before had been to his liking. Marybeth took the pair of rams he'd offered and made their supper as best she could without seasonings.

Perhaps in the spring I'll try a garden. There's room enough by the river, and many herbs would do well near the shadow of the hill.

She kept having thoughts for the future, plans and notions all during supper, along with the grunts and nods that normally passed for conversation with her husband. When the meal was done, he sat by the fire for a while, motionless as stone. Marybeth could not even sit down. Her mind was in a whirl.

It's a dirty trick you're thinking about, Marybeth.

But what did it mean, and what would be the consequences? Marybeth didn't know. She thought, perhaps a little certainty was due her just now. She even had an idea of how to get it.

Marybeth left the ogre sitting beside the fire and crept off to the alcove shelf where they kept Dara's Cauldron among the other wonders.

"You know my heart's desire," she whispered to the little crockery jar. "Can you help me?"

There was a soft hum, then a clink! of metal from within the jar. Marybeth reached into the crock and pulled out a small golden ring. She looked at it carefully and finally decided that it was no more than it seemed—just a plain gold ring, with no magic or special virtue about it.

She smiled. It was perfect.

Marybeth returned to her husband, now asleep by the hearth. Each of his snores was like a small earthquake. While he slept, Marybeth quickly put the cauldron's gift to use.

THE NEXT MORNING SHE AGAIN STOOD ALONE WITH THE SIDHE LORD IN the clearing.

"My answer is yes," she said, matching Blackbone gaze for gaze. "If you want me, then I am yours."

"What of your husband?" he asked, a gleam of mischief in his eyes.

Marybeth smiled at him. "You and I are all that matter now."

"This is as it should be, Lady. You will see."

I am a girl from Tumby Town and no lady, Marybeth thought, *but we most certainly will see.*

Blackbone kissed her then. His mouth was warm and sweet against hers, and she returned the kiss, hesitantly at first but then with more confidence. He was not the first she'd ever kissed, but what was to come after would be new indeed. Blackbone gathered her up in his arms. She felt his confident strength as he carried her somewhere, at first she could not tell to where. Then he lay her down on something soft and yielding. It was the bed in the ogre's den; Marybeth recognized the smell of the fresh washed bedding, changed just that morning.

Blackbone apparently saw the question in Marybeth's eyes. "Do not worry. He will not trouble us."

Marybeth reached for him in answer. "I *am* afraid of the ogre," she said, "but not the way you think."

"How, then?"

She kissed him again, briefly. "When the time comes, I think you'll understand."

Blackbone smiled. "A hint of mystery. It's important to human women, I am told. I'll not deny you so little."

Marybeth held her hand over his lips for a moment, silencing him. "Right now," she said, "you'll deny me nothing."

IT FELT A LITTLE LIKE DROWNING.

Or rather, how Marybeth imagined drowning to be. First a struggle, long or short, or rather a *striving* for what seemed impossibly far and yet so close and so within reach. Then the waves, one after the other, rising higher and higher until she went under. Then memories

ded that she didn't really ere was something she did want...

of the struggle, then surrender and calm floating back to the surface again. Even a little bit of death in the darkness of that very last tide.

Drowning would not be so pleasant, except perhaps with Merrow's help.... Marybeth smiled at Blackbone, lying silent beside her. He was not sleeping. His eyes were open wide, and he was not smiling. Marybeth sighed. It seemed that the time of reckoning had come. Now she would see if there had been any worth to any of this, beyond the moment.

Blackbone finally sat up. He did smile now, and it looked like a smile of triumph, not joy. Marybeth watched him closely but she did not move.

There was a new rumble in his voice from the first word he spoke. "And now—"

It was like the dance of two vipers, but Marybeth struck first. "And now, *Husband*, you will explain why you tried to play such a dirty trick on your wife."

Blackbone's smile was crushed under the weight of pure astonishment, along with the face and form of the lord of the Sidhe. In a moment Blackbone was gone. The ogre lay in his place in the bed beside Marybeth his wife, almost shrinking under the glare of her eyes.

"You knew? *How* did you know?" he asked.

"Just as an ogre is an ogre, or a Merrow is a Merrow, it seemed to me that a lord of the Sidhe would be a Sidhe. Yet you gave yourself a name to court me. I heard that name, and all I could think of was a mask. It did not seem right."

"That is a suspicion, Wife. That is not a certainty."

Marybeth reached up toward his head and the ogre almost flinched. Marybeth grasped a strand of his long coarse hair and held it up for him to see. Neatly tied near the end of the lock was a plain band of gold. "The nature of gold is that it is unchanging. It remains. I knew that whatever form you took, by this sign I would know you. I've answered your question, Husband. Answer mine."

The ogre shrugged. Marybeth would have sworn he even looked a little guilty, if not contrite. "This is the way it is always done. I certainly could not come to you in my true form," he said.

Marybeth knew the truth of that, but still: "Why come to me at all? Why not have a proper ogress for your wife?"

He smiled a little sadly. "Perhaps there was such a thing as an ogress, once. No one has seen aught for a thousand generations. My race was doomed, unless another way could be found."

"Humans?"

The ogre nodded. "If an ogre breeds with a river maid, she *bears* a river maid. The same for the Sidhe. They know their nature, and there's no other road to take. Yet there's not a human maid born so sure of her own nature that she could impose it on her child, even if she wished. The child might be human. It might be an ogre. That happens sometimes even without an ogre's seed at root of it all."

There was truth again. But it wasn't the whole truth, and Marybeth wanted it all.

"If I had not seen through your trick, what then?"

"What else? I would have roared and gnashed and threatened. Most of all I would have had your own guilt to weigh against you, to shame you and protect my child."

Marybeth nodded. Now it made perfect sense. It would have been easy enough for the ogre to take a fair form and cozen any number of village maids, but then the ogre child would have had its brains dashed out the moment it was born. Now Marybeth understood why the ogre needed a human wife. That just left one question to answer.

"An ogre needs a human wife. Why does a human girl need an ogre husband?"

He blinked like a sleeper trying to waken. "I don't understand."

"My life is still in your hands, Husband. I know that. But your child's life will be in mine. Do you honestly think there is nothing I cannot do, subtleties and midnight herbs and omissions, tricks that reveal nothing and yet harm your seed in a thousand ways? If fear was enough, you wouldn't need this trap of guilt you laid for me."

"You would not harm my son...." There was fear at work now. It nestled in the ogre's eyes and made its home there. Before now Marybeth had resisted the urge to strike him. Now she resisted the urge to hug him and pat his hand in comfort. She did not relent.

"No, I very well might harm your son. But I certainly would not harm *our* son."

Marybeth thought the ogre looked surprised before. It was nothing compared to now. "Wife, you astonish me."

"It is my nature, Husband—you said as much yourself. A Merrow can only be a Merrow, an ogre an ogre, a Sidhe a Sidhe. But a human maid can tell lies and try on any nature that suits her. She can also tell herself the truth now and then. She can *choose*, the one thing the Not Born of Eve can never do. Strange as it does seem, if she finds the company congenial and the life full of wonders, she might even choose to be an ogre's wife. With a little persuasion, perhaps."

The ogre just stared at her a long time, as if his flesh were made stone under Marybeth's gorgon-gaze. Finally he shook his head wearily. "Your life is in my hands, but I think my future is as much in yours. So, then. A gift for a gift, fair exchange all around. How may an ogre court his lady?"

"Well," Marybeth said. "You may be an ogre and a beast, but you *could* adopt the human custom of hiding it now and then. I know you won't be able to pretend for long at a time, but it'll do you no harm and will please me. More, I think you'll find that any contentment you give me will belong to us both in time. Will you try?"

In a blink, Blackbone had returned, bearing a smile like summer. He reached for her hand and kissed it tenderly. "I *am* an ogre and a beast and always will be," he agreed. "But I am not a fool."

THERE *WERE* FOOLS ABOUT IN THE LAND, though. And heroes and questing farm lads. When they appeared, as they eventually did, to beard the ogre in his lair and steal this bit or that of his treasure, Marybeth would pretend to take pity and help them carry away some trinket or other that her husband didn't really miss. The ogre in turn would roar and gnash but still allow the reckless brave ones to escape by the narrowest of margins to tell the stories to their grandchildren, over and over. It was one game of many the ogre and Marybeth learned to play, as husband and wife, while they watched their own family grow and prosper.

Every now and then over the years, Marybeth would stop and wonder how her life could be so full and happy. After all, she *was* married to an ogre. Then she would smile and remember that, in the ancient scheme of man, woman, husband, and wife, it was nothing really new. □

The cover to Vonda McIntyre's Barbary *answers the question of whether there will be cats in space, though the author admits, "mine are enough trouble under full gravity." RIGHT: Hescox particularly enjoys illustrating aliens, as the painting he calls* Freemaster *proves.*

KING RICHARD
Conqueror of Space

The sense of wonder SF art of Richard Hescox.

BY EDWARD BRYANT

I THINK I FIRST ENCOUNTERED THE BRIGHTLY illuminated world of modern science fiction illustration when I was twelve years old and chanced upon an issue of *Amazing Stories*. To be quite truthful, I'd already gotten a fair grounding in fiction of the fantastic, starting with my grandfather reading aloud to me Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books and Kenneth Graham's *The Wind in the Willows*.

Even while I was growing up in the comparative isolation of a Wyoming cattle ranch, I was begging my parents for trips into town so I could ransack the groaning shelves of the Platte County Library for *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet* and *Miss Pickerel Goes to Mars*, not to mention Edgar Rice Burroughs and, only slightly later, the juveniles of Robert A. Heinlein and Andre Norton.

At any rate, it was the hot summer of 1957 and one Saturday, while my parents were shopping in town, I browsed the magazine and paperback shelves in the local drugstore. I chanced upon the July issue of *Amazing* and it completely blew me away. My eye was caught by the Ed Valigursky painting of a green, scaly dragon (or maybe it was a *Plesiosaurus*) rearing up out of what appeared to be New York Harbor. The beast had already crunched a freighter and was glaring hungrily down at a tugboat in the foreground. The composition covered the spectrum of an aquatic monster's basic

ABOVE: The strangely colored plant life of the Venus created by Edgar Rice Burroughs for his Carson *series lived in the artist's mind for many years before he finally got a chance to paint them. RIGHT:* Shai's Destiny *represents Hescox's first attempt to work in acrylics instead of oil. With only a few exceptions, he has worked in that medium since 1984.*

food groups—including plenty of fiber. Lots of yellows and greens, and some accents of reds. Yeah, I was hooked.

I didn't know it that lazy summer, but my world—and the world for all of us—was suddenly about to get a lot more science fictional. In a few months, the Soviets would loft *Sputnik* I, the first Earth-orbit artificial satellite, an antenna-trailing ball that circled the Earth every ninety minutes and weighed about as much as the average SF reader.

At any rate, proto-writer I was twelve and proto-artist Richard Hescox was a callow seven (he'd turn eight a mere four days after *Sputnik*'s launch on October 4th). The arena of science fiction illustration in that era was an incredibly broad world of effect ranging from the surreal and evocative SF fantasy visions of Richard Powers and Paul Lehr (starting a year later in 1958) to the still-viable and vital legacies of the pulp era, the bright, representative, realistic imagery of Earl Bergey, H.R. Van Dongen, and Frank Kelly Freas.

Anything went—and, other things such as talent and execution being equal, I loved it all. I must admit to living in a state of admiration for artists, since my graphic abilities are nonexistent. I'd be hard-put to draw a reasonable stick figure portrait of a human being to save my own life. Somewhere among my parents' memorabilia is an epic colored-pencil poster illustrating Roger Lee Vernon's forgettable *The Space Frontiers*. I taped three 8 1/2 by 11 sheets together to give my burgeoning artistic ambition full rein. My artistic ambition died right there. The handwriting was on the…page.

I'll leave the illustration to such as Richard Hescox. He's an artist I've admired for quite some time. I figure I'm the perfectly disinterested observer since he's never executed the cover for one of my books or—to my knowledge—illustrated one of my stories.

I don't believe I've ever met the man.

As I mentioned earlier, he was born in October 1949, which suggests such prenatal influences as the development of the first Soviet A-bomb, the discovery of the meson, the building of the BINAC computer, Stan Musial winning the MVP Award for the third straight time, the publication of Orwell's *1984*, artistic triumphants by Leger, Arp, Franz Kline, and architect Philip C. Johnson. Oh yeah, and songwriter Johnny Marks wrote the immortal holiday tune, "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

It was quite a year. No wonder that Mr. Hescox turned out to be the protean talent

he is. Any selection of his illustrations will bear that out.

At their best, artists don't just simply hand us a done-deal piece of work in which the picture makes its statement and then falls to the floor with a discernible thud. Effective illustrations leave us with questions, not necessarily frustrating ones, but certainly stimulating queries.

Case in point: a painting Hescox calls *Space Vectors*. A figure with hands folded behind his back looks somberly down from some sort of orbital weapons platform at a planetscape (maybe Earth?) as a half-dozen nuclear explosions detonate below. The figure stands beside a huge metal canister apparently stuffed with nuclear-tipped warheads. Is the figure responsible for the blooming? Is he ready to launch more megatonnage? Or is he from a different political side, and wondering if he should go ahead and compound the devastation via massive retaliation? What is the expression we viewers cannot quite make out? Satisfaction? Unholy glee? Shock? Outrage? The picture's a terrifying image, and a portrait of ambiguity.

Born a Californian, Richard Hescox studied at the College of Design at the Art Center in Los Angeles. He started out in oils, but pretty much switched to acrylics in 1984 with *Shai's Destiny*, one of his many paperback covers for DAW Books. The artist says he likes the crispness lent by acrylics. Indeed that's true in this dynamic image of a human-crewed but odd high-tech vessel plowing across an alien sea.

The artist's first professional sale was to the Marvel Comics publication, *Monsters Unleashed*. One can see that sort of pop graphic approach reflected in a painting such as *Honor and Fidelity*. Here we've got armor-suited human soldiers duking it out at close range with gumboid alien water-dwellers. But again, the questions arise. Who are the good guys? Are the amphibians fighting desperately for their own aquatic world? Are the air-breathing humans about to be overwhelmed by the imperialist ambitions of oceanic aggressors? There's no way to tell—save through the viewer's imagination.

Richard Hescox has said he was an Edgar Rice Burroughs fan who favored N.C. Wyeth and J.W. Waterhouse back in art school. *Lost on Venus* seems clearly a labor of love. The colors are spectacular. As for the action scene Hescox depicts... Well, one can opt for at least a couple of interpretations. Now this could be Burrough's hero Carson Napier and his Gibson Girl native honey in the grip of the

I like the *Freemaster* cover for bringing the focus inside to a warm two-shot of a young human woman and an obviously alien mentor. The mood is perfectly set by the light spilling out of the fireplace. Note particularly the alien artifacts, especially the asymmetric coat-of-arms-style wall hanging, the duckoid alien stoppered bottle, and the mentor's cool footwear. Only the most conscientious of detail-oriented artists remember to get the shoes right. And these are shoes that have to be devised by the artist's own ability—you just can't find these sorts of clogs down at Famous Footwear.

villainous indigenes with bad teeth, worse complexions, and no doubt uncomfortably hairy hides.

My preference is to view this as an expansion of the old SF pulp illustrative chestnut of the aliens capturing and making off with the beautiful—and usually scantily, or at least impractically clad—heroine for presumably sinister purposes we usually never discover. Food? Sex? Retail sales? Hard to say. But the sexism was always readily apparent. Perhaps in Hescox's composition, both attractive, clothing-disadvantaged humans are bound for the *same* undisclosed fate. I'd like to think so. Fair is fair.

The artist's love of action-based scenes is nowhere more readily apparent than in *Lair of the Cyclops*, the tightly focused composition in which a human and two nonhuman but obviously sentient allies are going mano-a-tentacle with a horde of purple alien monstrosities. The aliens' green tongues are particularly and effectively yucky.

Action—that most favorite of Hescox's key words—is the engine driving *The Unwound Way*. But again there are mysteries along with the obvious elements. You have a pair of ultra-*ultra*-light fliers dogfighting, one with a rifle, one with a grappling hook tied to the end of a coiled line. They're jockeying for position in a

LEFT: Hescox enjoyed the artistic challenge of figuring out the lighting effects of a series of atomic explosions in Space Vectors. *ABOVE:* The Unwound Way *demonstrates the artist's love for non-stop action.*

peculiar sky the viewer's eye gradually discerns is actually the inside of some huge artificial environment, perhaps the hull of a generational starship. There's a green sea with erupting volcano, a cloud-patched sky, and then those bizarre tuliplike land-masses protruding from the higher, fabricated sky. What's it all mean? The imagination runs riot. Hescox's figures and hardware are beautiful and convincing. Try to ignore the aerodynamic probabilities of steering your jet-wings by kicking back on a tail surface strapped to your legs. These are soldiers who just might have some career problems with lower back pain!

Richard Hescox has worked as a production illustrator for such films as *The Philadelphia Experiment* and *The Howling.* It's not hard to see that kind of dynamic illustrative approach in *Star Sister.* This is a painting with virtually everything: The high-tech facility under bombardment from a rain of atomic missiles, a background firefight between humans and armed (well, tentacled...) aliens who would do justice to the frightful creatures in the old *Mars Attacks* trading cards, and a defiant woman in the foreground who clearly is trying to use some sort of power (perhaps psionic?) in a glowing amulet. *I'd* go to see a film publicized by this sort of poster. In a shot. Wouldn't you?

The illustration for Vonda McIntyre's *Barbary* shows serious-looking female spaceship pilots performing serious tasks while an equally serious feline looks on with great purpose. There's a heroic cast to this marvelous scene. It's a painting in which something important is obviously just about to happen. Orbital departure? Exit to hyperspace? The raising of consciousness? The questions are manifold and intriguing. What happens to the cat under hard acceleration? That's one thing I want to know.

We all live in a time—and Richard Hescox works in the same time—when the gulf between conceptual and representative artists has never been wider. Hescox has said that he loves science fiction illustration because it never forgets its roots in academic art. Art that doesn't seem to be art, abstract art, nonrepresentational art, don't seem to be prominent in his artist's palette.

Academic art? Standard definitions suggest art that conforms to set rules, art adhering to standards or traditions. The concept sounds reprehensible to radical innovators. Yet the modifiers "dull" or "boring" are not necessarily on the academic shopping list. Certainly they do not apply to Hescox's work.

To me he seems very much an heir, though rather more accomplished and infinitely more sophisticated, to that splendid tradition of science fiction art, with all its primary colors and hyperactive elements, that I tapped into that hot July day in 1957.

I loved it then; I love it still. It's not *all* the art I appreciate and cherish, but it's a stable base from which to foray outward to less certain territories. It's a place where the sense of wonder still reigns supreme.

When that territory is the artistic domain of Richard Hescox, count me in as an eager immigrant and fan. □

Death is inevitable. But for a time traveler, inevitable can stretch into a long, long time.

A SORT OF WALKING MIRACLE

BY STEPHEN DEDMAN

Illustration by Tom Simonton

THE ROOM WAS DARK, APART FROM THE SICK BLUE glow from the clock on the VCR, the reflection in the half-open eyes of the family Siamese, and a diffuse hint of light from underneath a closed door somewhere upstairs. The messenger stood for a moment, letting his eyes adjust, then reached into the pocket of his leather jacket for a penlight. A quick sweep of the room revealed thick carpet, an enormous television, a complicated stereo, shelves of books and tapes and trophies, a space heater, a leatherish-looking sofa and chairs, a vase full of roses.... It all smelled clean and rich and respectable, and new. He calculated quickly, then noticed a newspaper folded on the seat of the largest chair, and grinned. He picked it up, careful not to rustle it, and a picture of the New York skyline and the word *bomb* caught his eye simultaneously. He flinched, and then read the rest of the headline and the first paragraph. Just a car bomb in the World Trade Center. He sat down on the arm of the chair, drew a deep breath, and looked at the paper again. *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Friday, March 5, 1993.

Nineteen ninety-three. Jesus, he thought, I'm in the future. And San Francisco. Haven't been here since—

The cat glanced at him, then went back to sleep. He pointed the penlight at the floor, and listened. He had excellent hearing, and had always been good at listening, which isn't quite the same thing. Outside, still suburban streets. Inside, only one other person in the house, upstairs, awake. He switched the penlight off, pocketed it, and walked carefully toward the stairs, making no more noise than a cat.

There was a thin line of light showing under only one of the doors; he padded along the corridor, and knocked lightly. He heard someone inside jump, and then a girl's voice called, "Who's there?"

"A friend."

There was a disbelieving gasp from the other side of the door, and then the voice, trying to sound older, snapped, "I've got a gun."

HE OPENED THE DOOR SLOWLY, AND looked inside. The girl was sitting on the bed, crossed-legged, wide-eyed, dressed in designer jeans and a silk blouse with a small roll of puppyfat showing between them. There was a thin paperback face-down near her feet, with a sheet of notepaper tucked inside it. He guessed her age at fifteen, maybe younger. She saw his scuffed leather jacket, his dusty Levis and boots, his shaggy hair and beard, and recoiled. He hoped he didn't smell too bad; he could barely remember the last time he'd been able to take a hot shower. "If you've got a gun," he said, softly, "why'd you need the pills?"

"What?" She glanced at the open jar in her hand, as though noticing it for the first time, and then dropped it on the bed, spilling the pills. "I—who the hell are you?"

"My name's Colin Patterson, if that helps. It probably doesn't, but I'm not a burglar or a rapist. Can I come in?"

"How did you *get* in?"

"That's a long story. Can I sit down?" He shrugged his khaki pack off his back, and slid it along the floor toward her. "There's a gun in *there*, if it makes you feel better. Survival rifle: it should only take you a minute or two to assemble it...and a knife."

She stared at the pack, then at Patterson. "Get out! Get the *hell* out and leave me alone!"

He didn't move.

"Did you hear me? I said, get out!"

"I heard you," he replied. "You were going to take all of those pills, weren't you?"

She stood, her face white. "What the hell business is that of yours?"

"There's been an accident. Your parents are going to be late."

"*What*?"

"That's all I know. I mean, they weren't *in* it, they're not *hurt*, they're just stuck in traffic. They'll be home an hour or so later than you expect them. That's all she told me."

"She?" She stared, seeing the gray at his temples and in his beard, the creases in his forehead, then sat down again, her face crimson. "You're a friend of my mother's," she said, despairingly.

He shook his head. "I've never met your mother. *She* is...can I sit down? Thanks. *She*...look, what do you want me to call you? I know your name's Genevieve, but—"

"Jenny."

"Fine." He noticed the can of Diet Pepsi on the bedside table and asked, "Can I have some of that? It feels like years since I had anything to drink."

She handed it over. "If you're not a friend of Mum's, then how did you get in?"

"Well, that's—"

"A long story. Tight. Do you do this often?"

"Oh, yes," he replied. "Yes, all the time." He took a long swig of the Pepsi and grimaced; Jenny actually laughed and then recoiled when she realized what she'd done. Patterson shook his head and closed his eyes. "That's better," he said, and passed the can back. "Don't worry; I've left you enough."

"Huh?"

"To wash the pills down. If you still want to. But if you do, you'll die. I mean, *die*. Is that what you really want?"

She sat down, then curled up on the bed, kicking the jar and the paperback to the floor, and stared at the wallpaper that her mother had chosen years before. "Why else would I take a whole bottle of sleeping pills?"

"I don't know. Me, I've never wanted to die. That's sort of why I'm here—part of it, anyway."

"I've got reasons."

"Maybe you have. Want to talk about them?"

"Reasons you wouldn't understand."

"That's possible."

"And I don't have to explain myself to you!"

"I know."

Suddenly, she burst into tears. "Why *are* you here?"

"To help you," he said, softly. "If you really want to die, OK, I'll go: I think we all have the right to choose when we want to die. In my case, it was *never*, which was probably a mistake.

"And if you're trying to make a statement, if you think that the only way you can get people to care, to listen to you, to help you, whatever, is to try to kill yourself, or look like you tried...maybe you're right. You're probably not, but I don't really know. All I was told before I came here was that your parents were going to be—"

"In an accident," she repeated, dully. "Who told you that?"

"A girl. No one you know...well, actually, she might be, I don't know. You see, there are these three women...or maybe it's only *one* woman, I...did you ever see that movie of *Macbeth*?"

"What? The Polanski film? Yes; why?"

"Do you remember the three witches? One ancient, one middle-aged, one a teenager? That's what these three remind me of...but they're also a lot like each other, uncannily so. Maybe they're just grandmother, mother and daughter, but I really think they're the same woman, you know, like I was seeing them at thirty year intervals." He paused. "I know, that sounds bizarre, but they could do it. They send me through time, why the hell not themselves?"

"They send you through time?"

"Well, yes and no... I really don't know, but...have you ever heard of alternate worlds?"

"Like, what if the Nazis had won World War II? Or Kennedy hadn't been shot? That sort of thing?"

He nodded. "Most of them aren't *that* different—not the ones I've been to, anyway. Not that I've noticed, anyway; I haven't had time to study most of them. The way the woman—or women—explained it to me, the only things that change the worlds are deaths. Not all deaths—hell, everyone's got to die *sometime*—but some deaths are..." He looked up at the light. "Jesus. I have to explain this nearly every time; you'd think I'd be good at it by now. Chloe warned me that I needed to practice. Anyway, most deaths are...maybe not inevitable, but...*fated*, I guess. Like in *Lawrence of Arabia*, you know, 'It is written that he should die.' Or at least *probable*. But some deaths can be prevented. Like yours."

She laughed sourly. "You mean I'm going to live forever? Shit."

Patterson shrugged. "I don't know how long you're going to live, or how you're going to die. I don't know what sort of difference you're going to make to the world. But the women sent me back here to talk to you, so they must think there's a chance." He grimaced. "Sometimes it doesn't work. If you really *want* to die, I can't stop you, and I won't. But most 'suicides' don't, and I don't think you do—"

"I—"

Patterson continued, ignoring the interruption. "Or maybe you're like Tom Sawyer, you want to 'die temporarily.' But there's no such thing. I don't think you know what dying means. Like most teenagers."

"And you do?" she said, sarcastically.

"I've seen people die," he replied, slowly. "Mostly when I was in Vietnam. I was drafted. I could—I *should*—have run away to Canada or somewhere, but I didn't. I guess going to war was a form of teenage

suicide too: fortunately, it's no longer fashionable.

"I saw suicides there too, including one Buddhist monk who set himself alight. I wouldn't try to stop him then; I wouldn't now. He chose the time and place of his death and that was his right; he may have been doing it as a gesture, a political statement, but I believe he *knew* what he was doing. He knew it was real. And when I saw that, I knew it was real. Never knew it before. Most teenagers don't. They think they're too young to die, just like they're too young to get pregnant, and they're *never* going to be like their parents, right?

"You can take those pills if you want to. Like I said, I don't know what's worrying you. If you want to tell me, I'll listen; if I can help, I will. But I can't help you, no one can help you, if you're dead...and I don't think you really want to be dead."

She sat up and looked at him. "Haven't *you* ever wanted to die? I don't think I know anyone who hasn't—and a lot of my friends have tried."

"Not that I can remember. Maybe I did when I was your age, but it was always too damn scary, even scarier than growing old. I just wanted to get away from home, have a life of my own. After that... well, the first time I saw Chloe, she—"

"Chloe?"

"The girl who sent me here. She calls herself Chloe Weaver, though I never believed that was her name. We were both staying in a backpacker's hostel in Seattle in 1985; some guy was doing tarot readings, and I asked if he could tell me where I was going to die. He asked why, and I said, so I could make sure I never went there.

"Chloe came up to me later—we were staying in the same dorm—and asked if I was serious about that. I said, sure I was serious. She said she could tell me where." He shrugged. "I liked her—don't get me wrong, she was too young for me, for one thing—so I called her bluff and said, OK, tell me.

"'Right here,' she said. 'Here in Seattle. This is where you're destined to die.'

"I didn't laugh. She just looked at me and asked if I believed her. I asked her *when*, and she said, 'Tomorrow morning, a few minutes before noon.'

"'OK,' I said. 'What can I do to avoid it—apart from not being here?'

"'Only that,' she said—pretty coolly, I thought—and then, 'Were you planning to stay in town long?'

"'Not if I can get a lift somewhere. There doesn't seem to be anything going on here.'

"'Are you looking for work?'

"'Well, it doesn't seem to be looking for me,' I told her. She smiled at that and said, 'You might be wrong. I have a job for you. It doesn't pay well—but it'll get you out of town.'

"'Driving deadheads?'

"'What?'

"'Courier work?'

"'In a way,' she said. 'You like to travel, don't you?'

"I don't remember what I said to that—probably yes—but the next thing I knew, we were standing in a forest: no buildings, not even a road or a telegraph line in sight, I could see all the way out to Mount Rainier, and no signs of human life at all except the two of us and I wasn't too sure about her. I don't know how she does it. I've never seen any sort of time machine or anything, but maybe it's back in the future somewhere, or another dimension, or maybe it's really small. And if you were going to travel through time, would you carry a big machine around with you and show it to everyone?

"Anyway, next thing I knew, we were back in our dorm in the hostel. She told me that she needed someone to take messages through time, occasionally—messages to people like you, suicides who didn't really want to commit suicide, who were just trying to make some sort of statement and things got out of hand. She said she was getting too old for the work; I thought, at the time, she was trying to make a joke."

Patterson shrugged. "I got to admit, I liked the idea. I'd never been a lot of use to anyone before, and I thought maybe I'd get to save people like Tchaikovsky, you know...I mean, I'd heard Tchaikovsky deliberately drank contaminated water to give himself cholera, because he was being blackmailed for being gay, and I always thought, how horrible and what a *waste*. Or Alan Turing. I guess you could say I had a call. And, like she said, it was a chance to see the world, and if I was good at it and didn't quit, I could save a lot of lives, maybe even talk down a war.

"So I said sure, and went and spent the last of my cash on some gear I thought would be inconspicuous and useful—which is why there's a survival rifle in there, and a survival knife: there was a big war scare on at the time, *Rambo* was breaking box-office records, and survivalist gear was everywhere.

"And the next day I got up and got dressed, and suddenly I was in England, in a small apartment that reeked of gas. There was a woman there who'd tried to seal the kitchen and turn the gas on, but she obviously didn't want to die; she knew there was a girl coming around at nine, and she'd left a note on the table with her doctor's name and number. Unfortunately, the gas had seeped into the room downstairs, so when the girl arrived and tried to get help, the man who lived there didn't wake up. If I hadn't unlocked the front door, I'm sure she would have died." He shook his head. "A moment later, I was back in Seattle. Chloe—at least, she said she was Chloe, she looked *ancient*—told me I'd just saved Sylvia Plath. I didn't even recognize the name.

"She was the first; there have been dozens since. A lot of teenagers and students, like you. Most of them listen. I don't know how many try again."

They sat there in silence, then Jenny asked, "These women... Chloe...do you know who they are?"

"No. They know the future, so I guess that's where they're from. I think they're the same woman at different ages, a time traveler—probably someone I've been sent to talk down at some time."

"Maybe," said Jenny. "But—do you know that Pretenders song, 'Hymn to Her'?"

"No."

"How about Greek mythology?"

"A little. Never read much as a kid; my parents weren't into books. Still don't."

"There are these three women in Greek myth, the Gates: Clotho, the young maiden, spins the thread of each life; Lachesis, the mother, measures it out; and Atropos, the old crone, cuts it off. The three of them decide when it's someone's time to die, and they can't be defied; they're more powerful than all the Gods and..."

JENNY LOOKED UP, AND SAW THAT THE ROOM WAS empty. She sat there in silence for a moment, then knelt on the floor and began picking up the pills. When the jar was half-full, she muttered "Oh, the hell with it," and set it on the bedside table where she knew her mother would find it in the morning, and began getting ready for bed.

THE SUN HAD JUST BEGUN TO RISE WHEN PATTERSON reappeared in his scratched-out cave on the side of Mount Rainier; enough of its light broke through the perpetual clouds to turn the glassy, rain-filled crater that had once been Seattle from a sickly glowing blue pool into a dull red eye. As always, it reminded Patterson of the cauldron from *Macbeth*, full of dead things, which is what he would have been if he'd been there when the missiles hit. No matter how far he walked between trips, Chloe always brought him back here. All the other cities were the same, anyway.

Sighing, he reached into his backpack for his radio, his binoculars, his Geiger counter, and the AR-7 survival rifle. No sign of movement, nothing but static on the radio, radiation low enough for him to walk down to the ashen landscape that had once been a forest.

His own words echoed in his ears. *If you really want to die, OK, I think we all have the right to choose when we want to die. But if you're doing it as a gesture, a political statement, and you don't realize that it's real until it gets out of hand...you'll die. Is that what you really want?*

No, he thought. I guess it wasn't what any of us wanted. He assembled the rifle, and walked warily, stubbornly, down toward the ruins in search of food and some hint of life. □

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BOOKS

Continued from page 16

it did make me ponder about how many recent genre novels wallow in a sort of post-modern *Yellow Book* decadence, complete with archaic word-coinages, clever Latin inscriptions, chimerical heraldic animals courtesy of gene-engineering and VR, even the same penchant for caste-rankings of scientists, technicians, astrophysicists, sous-chefs, etc. I personally go in for this sort of book, but it wasn't until I read *Feersum Endjinn* that I was struck by how *many* of them there are. I've always descried the nuts-and-bolts artisanship of old-fashioned sci-fi writers as being clunkily written, with cardboard characters and stock scenarios, but a steady diet of all this rich stuff could make one yearn for a nice lumpen dumpling of a book. I realize that this is almost certainly a case of the amphora calling the kilderkin atramentous, but still—*Starship Troopers*, anyone?

Elizabeth Hand

RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

■ Life holds no greater pleasure than to find one's own judgment vindicated, which is why I was so pleased to hear the recent news that Samuel R. Delany's *Silent Interviews* (Wesleyan University Press, trade paperback, 322 pages, $16.95) made the final Hugo Awards ballot for the 1995 World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow, Scotland. Delany's novels have at turns been powerful, moving, popular and controversial (sometime *all* of the above), and his learned nonfiction has earned him the Pilgrim Award from the Science Fiction Research Association. According to the subtitle, the volume's interviews are "On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction and Comics," and readers are guaranteed to find that and more in its pages, all in Delany's well-thought-out but also, no-holds-barred prose. And prose is the proper word here, rather than speech or voice, even though these are interviews, because Delany has orchestrated them carefully. Often a brief question will yield a four or five page response, which will be a delight to Delany fans who are interested in the truth behind the birth of science fiction's New Wave, the details of his ill-fated graphic novel collaboration with Howard Chaykin, or his take on sword and sorcery and the clones of Robert E. Howard. Delany is always entertaining, and always worth reading. □

ROBOTS AND BATTLESTARS

OLD TELEVISION SHOWS NEVER DIE, they just get recycled into new SF comic books. The latest entry into this four color afterlife is **Battlestar Galactica** (Maximum Press), which was the first TV show that capitalized on the '70s SF craze spawned by *Star Wars*. It's been ten years since a comic book chronicled the adventures of this ragtag fleet of starships wandering the galaxy in search of planet Earth. Rob Leifield's new comic book company reintroduces

COMICS

the popular characters Apollo, Starbuck, Boomer, and the rest of the gang as they continue their quest. The first issue starts with their goal at last within reach, as Leifield, Robert Napton, and Karl Alstaetter return them to Earth. But it may be too late, for Commander Adama lies dying, and the maniacal traitor Baltor and the reptilian cylons are hot on their trail.

Lovers of Japanese monster movies will welcome the latest collaboration between Frank Miller and Geoff Darrow, **The Big Guy and Rusty the Boy Robot** (Dark Horse). Miller and Darrow's last project was the Eisner award-winning **HardBoiled**, the ultra-violent tale of a homicidal tax collector in a bloody urban slaughterhouse of a future. This time around, the pair goes to the other extreme, recreating the fun and innocence of those '50s films, as a gargantuan monster tears apart downtown Tokyo, turning the population into mutant freaks. Coming to the rescue is Japan's coolest little hero, Rusty, the Boy Robot, a spritely dynamo who does battle with his American counterpart, the hulking Big Guy. Recapture those Saturday afternoons of your youth when gigantic monsters destroyed the same cities week after week, with this no-holds-barred tour de force of superheroics and atomic battles, presented in an extra-large 9" x 12.5" format.

No discussion of pictorial SF is complete without a look at the classic work by EC Comics, which continues to be brought back into print. **Weird Science** (Russ Cochran) continues this laudatory project with a reissue of the thirteenth issue of this brainchild of Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein. The artwork in this issue is as perfect as comic art can be. Wally Wood provided the art chores for "A Weighty Decision." Jack Kamen drew "Saving for the Future," in which a couple invents the technology for suspended animation, planning to awaken rich in a future where their modest investment becomes a great fortune. In Wally Wood's "He Walked Among Us," a space traveler lands on a backward planet where upon feeding the hungry and curing the sick, he is considered a savior. In "Say Your Prayers," Joe Orlando details an Earth invaded by aliens who look like giant praying mantises. All four tales come with EC's patented twist endings.

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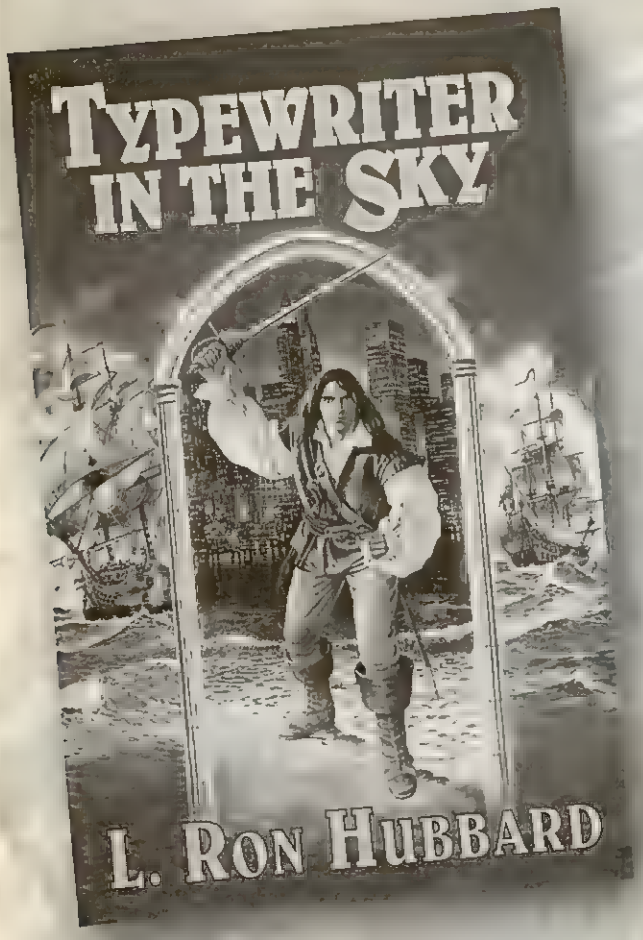

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By Daniel L. Marcus

Don your battle armor and defend starship *Marathon* against alien invaders.

Above: The hunt is on. Track mantis soldiers in Bungie Software's stunning visuals. Below: The control panel of the Marathon *starship.*

I'M NOT MUCH OF A GAME FREAK. SURE, I'VE BEEN through the 12-Step *Tetris* Recovery Program and I took a leave of absence from my day job so I could get through *Myst*, but I can usually maintain a sense of perspective. So, a few months ago, when I heard about a new game for the Mac called *Marathon* that reputedly makes *Doom* look like a wheelchair race in a convalescent home, I was mildly interested and I stepped out to my local software emporium to check it out. Unfortunately, it was 11:30 in the evening and they weren't open. I found a refrigerator box filled with styrofoam packing material (which can be surprisingly warm if there's not much wind) and settled down for the night. When the store opened, I picked myself up a copy, brought it home, installed it on my Quadra 650, and double-clicked on the intriguing little deco-mechanical icon.

Some time later, I emerged from my office, blinking from the sudden change in light. My wife was standing in the hallway with a strange expression on her face.

"Hi, honey," I croaked.

"You've grown a beard," she said, leaning toward me and wrinkling her nose. "And you don't smell very good. How long have you been in there?"

"What's today?"

"Thursday."

"Oh."

I'm not saying that if you start playing *Marathon*, your career will fall apart like a cheap suit and your marriage will last about as long as a snow cone in a pizza oven. I'm not saying that at all. I *will* say, however, that I haven't had so much fun since Marsha Galuski brought me out to the utility shed behind her house to look at her father's weed-whacker.

Here's the background story. You are a science officer aboard the colony starship *Marathon*, in orbit above one of the planets in the Tau Ceti system. Returning from the planet's surface, you discover that the ship has been invaded by some very nasty aliens. To make matters worse, one of the ship's three Artificial Intelligences, Durandal, appears to have gone insane and is about to toast your shuttle. You don your battle armor, grab a pistol, escape in a maneuvering pod, and slip onto the *Marathon* via an overlooked docking bay.

The basic idea in this game is simple: run like hell and kill everything that moves. You see your surroundings as if from the headset of your battle armor. There's a control panel that provides information about shield strength, oxygen level, and ammunition, and a very handy motion sensor. You can switch to a real-time map display to help you find your way about the ship.

The visuals are stunning. The fully realized three-dimensional environments give a palpable sense of space, made even more real by "texture-mapped, continuous motion graphics." You negotiate tight, claustrophobic corridors, wander through huge, cavernous storage bays, trip switches that put elevators into motion or open hidden doors. To make life even more interesting, there are teleportation booths scattered throughout the levels.

The aliens are suitably creepy and come in a variety of shapes and sizes, from mantis-like, shock-stick-wielding soldiers to giant radioactive-goo-spitting wasps. "Dynamic sensing AI" makes them formidable and tricky. And they make a lovely *crunch* when you send them to Bug Heaven.

You start with just a skanky little pistol and your fists, but as you fight your way through the ship, you pick up better weapons and more ammo. There's a very nice combination assault rifle and grenade launcher, a "fusion pistol" that fires energy bolts, a missile launcher, and my personal favorite, a flame thrower that squirts a jet of flaming napalm out to a range of twenty yards. The visual effects that accompany these weapons are outstanding.

You are helped along the way by Leela, one of the other AI's on board the beleaguered starship. If you can find her terminals, she will give you mission objectives and hints, and let you know what's going on in other parts of the ship. But Durandal is slowly taking over her systems, so her information isn't always very reliable. Yes, *Marathon* actually has a *plot*. As you work your way through the ship, more is revealed, and there are twists that catapult you in unexpected directions.

A whole other dimension of *Marathon* is network play. You can gather up a few of your friends, hook your Macs together, and have at it. Bungie has created environments

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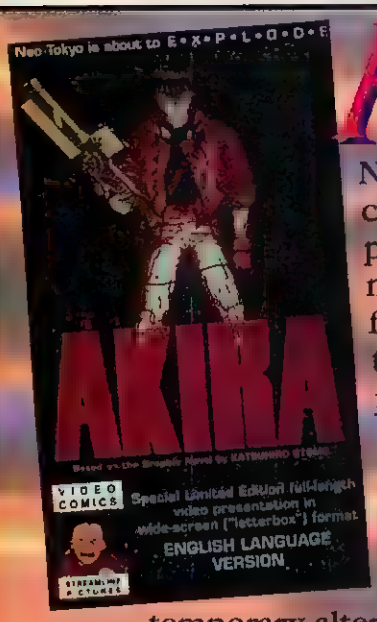

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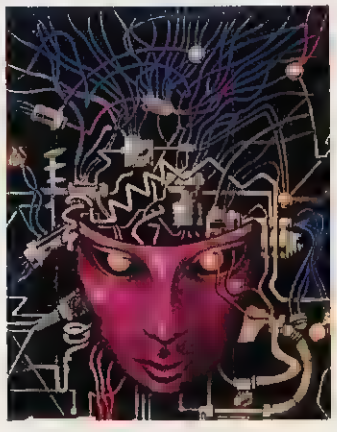

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designed exclusively for net play.

Marathon being the sort of game it is, and people who play games like *Marathon* being the sort of people they are, even before the game was released, folks were trying to figure out ways to hack it. Industrious *Marathon* enthusiasts have written heaps of shareware for just this purpose, and it is freely available on the Net. With a physics model editor you can modify weapons effects, alien behavior, even local gravity. There are shape editors that allow you to import or create your own graphics. Map editors help you to create your own *Marathon* environments.

I was so taken with this game, unlike anything I have ever seen on a Mac or a PC, that I got in touch with Bungie Software to arrange an interview. I spoke with the CEO, Alex Seropian, and the chief programmer, Jason Jones.

SF AGE: One of the things I really enjoyed about *Marathon* was encountering a lot of familiar science fiction tropes—psychotic computers, hostile aliens, endangered colonists. What are some of your influences from science fiction literature and film?

Jones: The fiction that I've enjoyed the most has been written by Larry Niven. As far as film goes, my favorite science fiction movie has to be *Aliens*. I just saw that again a few days ago—excellent movie. And the guys who worked on the creative end of *Marathon* have been into science fiction forever. It's hard to pin down all the influences.

SF AGE: One of the striking aspects of the game is the plot that serves as much more than just a background story for a shooter. Did you build the game around the plot, or did the plot emerge as the project evolved?

Jones: Both, actually. We had a plan before we started, and then it changed while we were working on the game. That tends to always happen—we're going through that process right now. You continue to develop an idea, and as you work with it, it changes.

SF AGE: Were there any design tradeoffs between solo and net play that you had to consider?

Jones: They tended to complement each other, although at some point we probably spent too much time on the network game because it was so much fun. We've got ten Power Macs on Ethernet here. But for the most part, anything we did for the network game made it into the single player game and vice-versa.

SF AGE: *Marathon*'s modular design makes it eminently hackable. As a software development project, the advantages of that approach are obvious. Was that a design spec for the release as well?

Jones: Yeah, it was, and we're actually going even farther in that direction in our next project, because that's obviously helped the popularity of the game.

SF AGE: Do you have any advice for would-be game designers?

Jones: We get asked that question a lot, and I don't really know how to answer it. You

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sit down and you conceive a project and you write out a story and you figure out what kind of technology you're going to have to create to make it happen. There's no formula. So I don't really know what to say to people who want to do this sort of thing, except that it's really fun, especially working for yourself, and if you have the desire and the knowledge, you should definitely give it a try. But learning how to do it is a long process. I mean, I've been working on games all my life—well, since sixth grade, anyway—and reading science fiction, and watching movies, and writing science fiction. I think eventually it just gets into your blood and you know how to do it. □

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The collector card game, having built itself quite a respectable niche in the gaming market, is about to be given a boost to the next level. Two titans have joined forces to produce a new gaming experience unlike any other. FPG, producer of fantasy art trading cards, and Wizards of the Coast, makers of *Magic* and the number one publisher of trading card games, will soon introduce the *Everway Game Set* and *Everway Collector Cards*.

The *Everway Game Set*, to be released this August by Wizards' Alter Ego Design Group, features fantasy art that both player and gamemaster can use to invent fantasy heroes, realms, and quests.

FPG's *Everway Companion Collector Cards* contain more vision cards for *Everway* players to use in their games, increasing the players' options many times over. *Everway* players will find a broad selection of cards from artists with diverse styles, chosen for their ability to spark the players' imaginations.

The cards have been chosen to represent the people and creatures of countless parallel fantasy worlds, not just the pseudo-European worlds so common in fantasy art. Players of fantasy games besides *Everway* can use the cards for their games as well. The backs of the cards have questions, written by the Alter Ego team, about the scenes on the fronts; the players then decide how these scenes fit into their fantasy worlds. □

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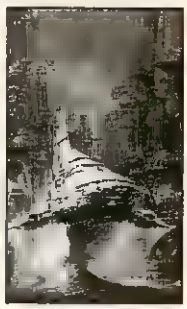

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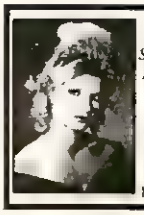

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SCIENCE

Continued from page 28

seem to see precursors to it, like a gradual decline and finally just collapse. It just changed all of a sudden. The political situation in the United States has gone through radical changes over the past twenty years, up and down. I consider now, since the '94 election, as up, but it's been down before, like '92. But it seems like history's out of control. There's a control mechanism that's gone, and wild swings occur. I've been asking other science fiction people, I ask you professionals tonight, what event was it, sometime in the last fifteen or twenty years, that was the cusp that Dr. Kondo spoke about? My own nominee occurred right down the street here, a couple of miles from us, in front of the Hilton in early 1981, when the bullet that Hinckley shot at President Reagan, probably in the other history, the real history, killed him, but in our history, he survived and ended Communism. Probably in the main drag of history, he died, George Bush became president, and the Communists probably now occupy South America and Mexico. That was the future *I* expected. Not this nice future that we inherited, with the Soviets gone.

KONDO: Perhaps I should ask Arlan first to define what he means by Eigen values. Do our readers understand that, or do you think we need to clarify that? Go ahead, Arlan.

ANDREWS: Well, many equations have more than one solution. The kinds of equations that describe the vibrations of sound in a speaker, for example, or the vibration of radio waves. They're called differential equations, and there are formal methodologies to go through to solve those equations. And you come out with an answer. Well, it turns out that there are sometimes periodic solutions to that, an infinite number of solutions.

KONDO: When you are dealing with a large-scale universe, large objects such as a ballpoint pen or even a tank, you can apply Newtonian mechanics to, except in extreme situations where you apply relativistic equations. But in a small realm of the universe, that is, when you talk about electrons and protons, the solutions are not true Newtonian ones. In fact, we have equations called quantum mechanical equations; you come up with a function that solves the equation of state for those atoms and particles. Those equations are called Eigen functions. Solutions to those equations are called Eigen values—unique solutions. And the solution doesn't really go continuously from one value to another. In fact, I have a notion that in the socio-historical context, Eigen function is not easy for us to formulate, but similar conditions do occur. The Eigen function also works in history, if you want to speculate. Perhaps the Soviet Empire could be understood only in those terms, because it's really mystifying how this great empire could disappear of its own will, not even with a revolution. It just changed overnight, practically. So, perhaps it's interesting for us to speculate in social and human phenomena that Eigen functions really work in a much more macroscopic sense. Then, I think what we're talking about becomes more interesting.

SF AGE: When you started, Arlan, you were saying that it's probably unlikely that there are other universes out there just like ours except for a couple of different changes, implying that instead there were a limited number created that are vastly different. Which theory has more evidence in its favor?

ANDREWS: As a human being first, and a science fiction writer second, I would hope that there are parallel worlds that are close to ours, but with varying historical events that satisfy the Eigen values of history. I'd like to mention again that in Eigen values, typically, there's an infinite number of solutions just to satisfy the equation. I would hope to think, as a Southerner, that there has to be a world in which Robert E. Lee's face is carved on Mount Rushmore, and Abraham Lincoln was hanged. And Picket's charge is commemorated at Gettysburg by a thousand-foot monument, and Ulysses S. Grant died in prison someplace.

SF AGE: Let's assume that that does exist somewhere, Arlan, theoretically—

ANDREWS: Can I get a passport?

SF AGE:—how would we ever know? Let's make the assumption that it's out there somewhere, and we want to prove whether it's an actuality or not. How do we move forward?

ANDREWS: We send a probe to one.

SF AGE: Well, the question is *how*? Let's say you have unlimited funds. What do we do to prove—

ANDREWS: Dr. Kondo works for NASA. So we can say that stands for National Alternate Spaces Administration. And have NASA send a probe. If you want details—

SF AGE: I *do* want details!

KONDO: Actually, Robert Heinlein had this spatial time translator in *The Number of the Beast*, and he translated into another universe using his gizmo.

SF AGE: What was his mechanism, or was it just the famous science fictional black box, where he just says it happens?

KONDO: As always, he spins a good yarn. He talks about something not really being possible in a four dimensional space-time if you do certain things. As a result, the gadget forces its operators into another universe.

ANDREWS: His *Number of the Beast* was 666. Six to the sixth power to the sixth power.

SF AGE: And he visited all the other fictional worlds he had created and brought all the characters together....

ANDREWS: I think it turns out that in those alternate universes they are real. And there was leakage where a writer in this universe would just pick up leakage from other places. And that's where we get all the ideas. If people ask, where do we get our strange ideas, well, there's an alternate universe, number six to the six to the 5.9 or something.

KONDO: That may or may not be in *The Number of the Beast*, but certainly an idea has been expressed that there may be leakages. Whatever you see in your dream may be visiting another reality. At least, that's what some people speculate. I don't know if Robert Heinlein necessarily meant it, but there are other writers who speculate the dreams are real.

ANDREWS: So when you have a psychic or fortuneteller who predicts the future, she can always come back and say, "Well, that occurred in the parallel universe. I'm just tuned into the other universe."

SF AGE: Are we fated for this to forever be a theory, or is there any way it can either be proved or disproved, regardless of what time or input we give the question?

ANDREWS: I would think the most complex phenomenon we have that we know about, short of the universe itself, would be the human brain. The human mind. I would think if these parallel worlds do exist, and I would hope that they do, in my gut level, that it would be the human mind that in some fashion would bridge it. God forbid if there's a Scott Edelman in another alternate universe, that when you dream, it wouldn't be telepathy, it would be sharing the actual same brain in another Scott Edelman who had slightly different experiences and different memories. I think we've all gone through this, if we want to get a little bit metaphysical. We've all had memories that didn't quite seem to jive. When you talked to other people, they said, "Well, it wasn't quite that way," and you said, "To me, it seemed very real." Now that's either senility... But one explanation, if you'd like, would be you're remembering leakage that's coming across from someone else.

KONDO: It's highly speculative, whatever we are saying now, regarding dreams. There are serious psychologists who want to explain dreams in terms of seeing things we actually experience, because of the way our brains function and so on. But it is still true that we cannot truly experience in this world what we see in our dreams. So there is room for speculation. And that's the first rule of writing science fiction. When we don't know completely, we are permitted to speculate. But even when we do know to the contrary, we can still speculate, if we in fact explain, as Robert Heinlein did, with his translating machine that can travel to six to the sixth to the sixth universes.

SF AGE: Are there any working scientists at the moment attempting to apply the scientific method to whether the universe has split sometime in the past? Or is it something that just cannot be proved or disproved?

ANDREWS: More specific, I don't know if it can be proved or disproved. I think the first person to formulate that will probably get another Nobel Prize. Or, you might ask the writers of the *Sliders* TV show.

SF AGE: Is anyone out there actually doing research or study on the concept?

KONDO: I don't think so. Let me first explain how the academic career works. If you are working for some organization, you do more or less whatever the organization is doing, the kind of research the organization thinks is valuable. Sometimes you can be independent, but by and large if you are working on a research project, you need grants from the government or foundations. You must justify it. And I don't think that anyone has been able to justify such ideas as parallel universes so convincingly as to get a grant. And if you don't apply for grants, your career tends to fizzle out. Often times, whether or not you get tenure depends, especially in many research universities, on how much money you have attracted and how many grad students you have supported, as well as your research record and publications. I am not aware of books or papers on this specific topic that treats the matter in a quantitative way, so it is rather unlikely anyone has proposed for a grant successfully.

ANDREWS: Yoji had the idea of not only parallel worlds, but maybe divergent worlds. Maybe he would like to elaborate on that.

KONDO: Well, what I meant is the theory that it is possible that the world is infinitely branching out, instead of just following one path that we seem to notice. In such a scenario, moving the glass from here to there, or not having found a parking spot, driving up the street, can change the future significantly. Just by about a few seconds I missed a parking spot right here. If I had found a parking spot, I might have been killed by another truck that had just come barreling down the street. These things are possible, too. An interesting aspect of this speculation is situations where a lot of people say, "Well, I wish that had not happened to me at the time. I wish I had done this or that." We all have moments like that. Most of us anyway. But you should understand that you might have died within a few seconds, a few days, or a few years if you had not done this or that. Everything is connected. Therefore if you change one small part somewhere, especially an important one, you will not be here for sure. I would not be talking to you, probably, had I done something differently in the past, although there is a finite probability that even if you change a few things I would still be here, enjoying soft shell crabs, or maybe linguine with clams.

ANDREWS: I think that we're all constantly bombarded by these choices, and we all like to think that there are parallel worlds in which things got better, but I want to go back to one thing that Yoji said earlier, and yes, I would have liked to have made some investments in the past that would have made me filthy rich, but now, if they had, I might have been in one of these ships that sank, or airplanes that crashed. We've all gone through these alternate universes. In many alternate universes we've died, and are worse off. Maybe we're the only ones left at this point.

KONDO: Good point.

SF AGE: Remember what they say—this is the best of all possible worlds.

KONDO: It's the only one we've got. □

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ESSAY

Continued from page 36

work was reviled in Ireland: "Once again, you have disgraced yourself!"

Readers hoard Lafferty first editions, prizing the tall-tale inventiveness of his work, its sheer strangeness, and the verbal facility that leaves critics and editors nonplussed. If you can find them, read *Past Master* (1968), *Fourth Mansions* (1969), *The Devil Is Dead* (1971), *The Reefs of Earth* (1968), or any other of his more than twenty-five books. He has been called "a national treasure." If ever there was a writer who showed up the essential animosity and inappropriateness of the commercial marketplace to genuine merit and genius, Lafferty is that writer.

9. WILLIAM TENN (1920- , pseudonym of Philip Klass) is the author of six collections—*Of All Possible Worlds* (1955), *The Human Angle* (1956), *Time In Advance* (1958), *The Wooden Star* (1968), *The Seven Sexes* (1968), *The Square Root of Man* (1968), and two novels, *Of Men and Monsters* (1968), and *A Lamp For Medusa* (1951, 1968). Read them all for their seriousness, wit, storytelling, comic genius, and thoughtfulness about this species to which we all belong, which alas, may not be a breakout species. Tenn is SF's best satirist. Despite his long silences, there have been new stories since 1970, and a new novel is known to exist. He's received no awards and is mostly out of print.

10. EDGAR PANGBORN (1909-1976) won the International Fantasy Award in 1955 for his second novel, *A Mirror for Observers* (1954). His other novels include *West of the Sun* (1953) and *Davy* (1964). Read all his books for their songfulness, poetry, all-embracing atmosphere, and a silken way with words. Pangborn started out to be a musician, and it seems to me that his fiction is more composed than written—as symphonies, operas, string quartets, and piano concertos. He is patient with his characters and with humanity, and the literate beauty of his prose is overwhelming. His work has been a critical success, but the publishing industry neglects to keep him in print.

Some years ago Frederik Pohl and I were in a bar in Rochester discussing neglected writers. "You know who any writer's reader is?" Fred asked. "It's some guy in Cleveland, in the middle of the night, who's picked up your book by accident and can't put it down, because it hit him upside the brain just right. It's an accomplishment. Hard to do, even for one reader."

Every good writer, and perhaps some bad ones, have at least one perfect reader somewhere, maybe several—and that, I believe, is a good enough sample to suggest that he or she could have more. Because these writers are largely out of print, they are deprived of any chance to find that one reader—or the many such readers—who would open the way to a wider readership for them. □

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Continued from page 22

undermine what he's doing, because I always want to keep Phil Dick's best tricks. I've never thrown away one of Phil Dick's best tricks when I've adapted his stuff. You have to do a lot of writing around his material, of course, to make it play on the screen."

O'Bannon noted that, at 37 pages, "Second Variety" turned out to be the ideal length to be adapted for a feature film. "It's easier to flesh out a short story than it is to cut down a novel, because movies are essentially a short form. The novel form is much too big for any movie. Screenplays as written usually come to about 125 pages, and then when you do a transcript of the finished film, they're usually about 100 pages long. When you figure that the type on the page only fills about a third of the page, you can see that the screenplay, in length, is about equivalent to a 30 to 35 page story. The novel form always has to be radically cut to squeeze it onto the screen. The short-short story form is difficult also, because a short-short story corresponds to a single act of a three act piece. The story form that corresponds precisely to movies is what's called the novella or novelette, which is a medium-length, three act short story. "Second Variety" was precisely that, so I didn't have to think about expanding it or cutting it. All I had to do was think about what changes I wanted to make in order to get it from being a literary experience to being on the screen."

Asked about other favorite SF authors of his, O'Bannon says, "Among currently working authors, both Greg Bear and William Gibson have given me a great deal of pleasure to read. As a kid, I certainly read all the familiar greats. I was a tremendous fan of the novels of Alfred Bester, and a terrific fan of Heinlein and what I've come to appreciate better as an adult now, looking over Heinlein's stuff, is his seminal virtuosity. Heinlein was like H.G. Wells in that he pioneered several major different science fiction themes. Everyone knows that Wells made up your basic science fiction themes: it all came from one man. He had the invasion from outer space, he had the time machine, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. It's been difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to be as good as Wells, because he mapped out all the ground at once.

Real snow covers the Canadian location of an abandoned, bombed-out city as Peter Weller and Andy Lauer look on.

"More and more it's apparent to me that Heinlein was like that. If you reread Heinlein's different works you see that he didn't repeat himself too much and he nailed several major themes, whatever was leftover after Wells. He was able to handle very different material and always do the best job with it and not leave much room for those who followed. Of course, the world being what it is, what Heinlein is most famous for is his military adventures. Posterity always seeks out the lowest level of somebody's work and lionizes that."

Screamers, which is scheduled to open in October, also stars Roy Dupuis, Jennifer Rubin, Andy Lauer and Michael Caloz. Director Christian Duguay (*Scanners II: The New Order and Scanners III: the Takeover*) helmed the production. □

New on Video

Tank Girl: Lori Petty brings to life the cult comic book hero with a whole lot of attitude. The year is 2033, and only Tank Girl can stop the world's water supply from being hoarded. Costarring Ice-T and Malcolm McDowell.

Star Trek: Generations: Captain James T. Kirk comes face to face with Captain Jean-Luc Picard when William Shatner and Patrick Stewart meet in the twenty-fourth century to defeat evil physicist Malcolm McDowell. The team-up Trekkers have been waiting for.

Evolver: When a teenager wins an evolver robot in a contest, he gets more than he bargains for—it evolves into a deadly killing machine. Starring *ST:TNG*'s "Q," John De Lancie in a tale of a video arcade game gone wild.

Galaxis: Brigitte Nielsen stars as a space and time-traveling freedom fighter battling to rescue her civilization from the clutches of intergalactic rogue Richard Moll. Directed by William Mesa, FX guru for *The Fugitive* and *Under Siege*.

Godzilla: Four favorites starring the radioactive lizard are being released—*Godzilla vs. Mothra*, *Godzilla vs. Monster Zero*, *Terror of Mechagodzilla* and *Last Days of Planet Earth*. Celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the king of all monsters.

Women Space Pioneers: Nichelle Nichols steps from behind the character of *Star Trek*'s Lieutenant Uhura to narrate this documentary that profiles the lives, achievements, and experiences of the first eight women in the United States space program.

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CONTRIBUTORS

GEORGE ZEBROWSKI HAS PUBlished twenty-six books, including novels, short fiction collections, anthologies and a book of essays. His best known novel is *Macrolife*, which Arthur C. Clarke described as "a worthy successor to Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker*." His most recent novel, *The Killing Star*, written in collaboration with scientist and author Charles Pellegrino, has just been published by William Morrow/Avon.

Stephen Dedman is a prolific short story writer, with appearances in magazines such as *Strange Plasma*, *F&SF*, *Aurealis* and *Asimov's*, and the anthologies *Little Deaths* and *Alien Shores*. He has also sold fiction to *Pulphouse*, *Down Deep* and *The Last Dangerous Visions*. **Daniel L. Marcus** has published fiction not only in our pages but in *F&SF*, *Asimov's* and *Witness*. He is currently a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, which will be presented at the World Science Fiction Convention to be held in Glasgow, Scotland this August.

Bruce Boston has published more than seven hundred stories and poems in magazines and anthologies ranging from *The New York Times Magazine* and *The Pushcart Prize Anthology* to *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* and *Asimov's*. He is a long-time resident of the San Francisco Bay area. Another San Francisco resident, **Martha Soukup**, is the focus of this issue's editorial. **Paul Di Filippo** recently won the British Science Fiction Association Award for Best Short Story for "The Double Felix." Fans will be pleased to learn that his novel *Fuzzy Dice* is almost completed.

Richard Parks sold his short story "A Time For Heroes" to the Kit Kerr anthology *Sorcery*, which will be out later this year from Harper Collins. He has also been writing criticism for the review magazine *Tangent*. **Stephen Johnson** obtained a BFA in painting at the University of Kansas, after which he studied for a year in France. His illustrated children's books include *A Christmas Carol* and *The Nutcracker Ballet* for Andrews and McNeel and *The Samurai's Daughter* and *The Snow Wife* for Dial Books.

Mark Tiedemann has made nineteen short story sales, with upcoming tales due to appear in *IASFM* and the Kevin Anderson-edited *War of the Worlds* anthology. (The protagonist for his story in the latter project is Leo Tolstoy.) He also writes plays for the St. Louis Theatre Radio Group in his hometown of St. Louis, Missouri. In addition to his non-fiction about SF, **Dan Perez** also writes fiction, with his most recent sales being to the anthology *Chthulu's Heirs* and the magazine *Cemetery Dance*.

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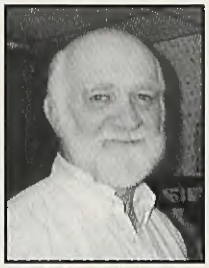
George Zebrowski



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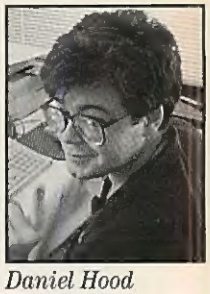

Daniel Hood

ELIZABETH HAND FIRST BEGAN PUBlishing fiction in 1988 with a short story in the defunct but beloved *Twilight Zone* magazine. Her non-fiction has appeared in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* and *The Washington Post*, and she is a contributing editor to the *Detroit Metro Times*. Her latest novel *Waking the Moon*, is just out from Bantam. **Daniel Hood** has followed up his first fantasy novel, *Fanuilh*, with its sequel, *Wizard's Heir*, now on sale from Ace. He will soon be returning to the United States from his stint as a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* in Belgium.

D. Douglas Fratz was the editor and publisher of *Quantum*, a magazine of SF criticism that was a five-time Hugo nominee. His book reviews have appeared in *Fantasy Review* and *The Washington Post*. By day, he is an environmental scientist in Washington, D.C. **Tom Simonton** has drawn everything from Westerns to children's books. His art resume includes the Congressional Medal of Honor trading card series, as well as the SF comic book *Texoma Red* from Fantaco.

Edward Bryant has been publishing novels, short stories and criticism for twenty-five years. The first collection of his fiction, *Among the Dead and Other Events Leading up to the Apocalypse*, appeared in 1973. He has won the Nebula Award for Best Short Story two years running, in 1978 and 1979. **William John Watkins** has been publishing SF novels for over twenty years, starting with the environmental disaster tale *Ecodeath*. Other novels include *The God Machine*, *What Rough Beast*, and *The Last Deathship off Antares*. □

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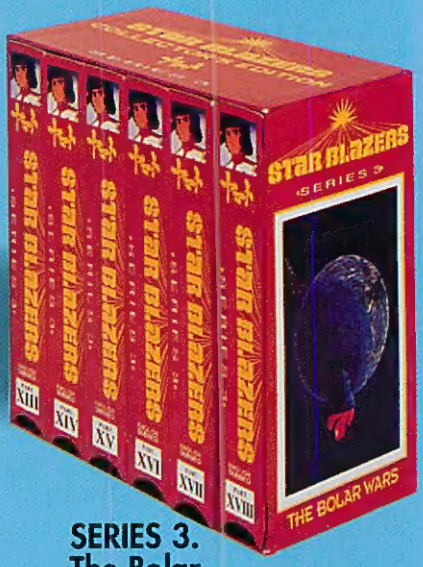

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